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THE READABLE EXPERIMENTAL NOVEL
Reading J. J. Abrams and Doug Dorst's *S.* and Mark Z.
Danielewski's *House of Leaves*

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Emma Wheeler: **The Readable Experimental Novel: Reading J. J. Abrams and Doug Dorst's S. and Mark Z. Danielewski's *House of Leaves***

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Käsittelen tässä pro gradu -tutkielmassa kahden kokeellisen romaanin luettavuutta. Kokeellinen kirjallisuus mielletään usein vaikeaselkoiseksi kirjallisuuden lajiksi, joka tarjoaa epämiellyttäviä lukukokemuksia. Näiden ennakkoluulojen vuoksi kokeellisten romaanien ei useinkaan odoteta nousevan myyntimenestyksiksi tai suuren yleisön suosimiksi klassikoiksi. Tällä vuosituhannella on kuitenkin ilmestynyt kaksi kokeellista romaania, jotka ovat odotusten vastaisesti osoittautuneet erittäin suosituiksi ja laajasti luetuiksi teoksiksi. Nämä kaksi romaania ovat J. J. Abramsin ja Doug Dorstin teos *S.* sekä Mark Z. Danielewskin *House of Leaves*. Tutkielmani ehdottaa, että nämä romaanit ovat suosittuja nimenomaan luettavuutensa eli helppokäyttöisyytensä ja ymmärrettävyydensä vuoksi. Kokeellisten ja lukemista vaikeuttavien ominaisuuksien lisäksi romaanit sisältävät lukemista ja sisällön ymmärtämistä helpottavia elementtejä. Tutkielmani pohtii, mitä ominaisuuksia nämä ovat ja millaisia lukukokemuksia ne tuottavat.

Tutkielman teoriaosiossa esittelen romaanien monikerroksista rakennetta ja juonellista sisältöä, sekä määrittelen tutkimuksessa käytetyt lukuprosessin ja lukijan teoreettiset mallit. Romaanien kokeellisista ominaisuuksista tutkielmassa keskitytään erityisesti kerronnan pirstoutuneisuuteen, verkostorakenteeseen ja multimodaalisuuteen. Pirstoutuneisuus liitetään erityisesti paratekstin käsitteeseen, ja romaanien sisältämiä tekstikatkelmia käsitellään siten varsinaisena tekstinä sekä sitä ympäröivinä todellisina ja fiktiivisinä parateksteinä. Romaanien verkostorakenne liitetään hypertekstin käsitteeseen, ja tämän avulla kuvataan romaanien tuottamaa epälineaarista lukuprosessia. Multimodaalisuudella tarkoitetaan romaanien tapaa käyttää kerronnassaan sekä kielellisiä, visuaalisia että kehollisia viestinnän keinoja. Lukuprosessi kuvataan viestintätilanteena, jossa kirjailijan tekstiin upottama informaatio välittyy lukijalle. Lukija puolestaan määrittää todelliseksi, fyysiseksi henkilöksi joka voi halutessaan hyödyntää tekstiin sidottuja lukijarooleja. Tutkielmassa ei näin ollen käsitellä todellisten lukijoiden ja tekstien välistä vuorovaikutusta, vaan lukija käsitetään kokoelmana hypoteettisia rooleja jotka ovat osa tutkittavia romaaneja.

Analyysiossa hyödyntää tätä teoriapohjaa kuvatessaan kolmea romaaneissa esiintyvää luettavuuden lähdettä. Ehdotan, että romaanien luettavuutta parantavat erityisesti niiden sisältämät genrekonventiot, niiden kerronnan tapojen lisäämä immerssiivisyys sekä metatason leikillisyys. Genrekonventiot lisäävät luettavuutta ohjaamalla lukijan huomiota pois kokeellisista elementeistä, kun taas immerssiivisyys ja itsetietoisuus lisäävät luettavuutta nimenomaan hyödyntämällä romaanien kokeellisuutta. Genrekonventioihin liittyvä analyysi liittyy siis tiukasti romaanien juonellisiin ja kerronnallisiin ratkaisuihin, kun taas immerssiivisyys ja metatason leikillisyys ovat yhteydessä romaanien pirstoutuneisuuteen, verkkorakenteeseen sekä multimodaalisuuteen.

Avainsanat: J. J. Abrams, Doug Dorst, S., Mark Z. Danielewski, *House of Leaves*, kokeellinen kirjallisuus, luettavuus

Tämän julkaisun alkuperäisyys on tarkastettu Turnitin OriginalityCheck -ohjelmalla.

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1 Introduction

Experimental fiction is often described as being challenging to read. This is because experimental fiction is, by definition, a branch of literature that “complicates reading by refusing to fit to the familiar, the conventional, and the already known and, for example, by defying attempts to make it yield a narrative” (Pyrhönen 4). According to Sabine Zubarik, experimental novels are often characterized by their unusual formal characteristics, such as their use of typography and layout, as well as their uncommon narrative techniques (19n1). Additionally, Rune Graulund observes that another typical feature of experimental novels is that, due to their challenging character, they are not necessarily expected to become popular or commercially successful (379).

The novels *House of Leaves* by Mark Z. Danielewski and *S.* by J. J. Abrams and Doug Dorst can both be identified as experimental novels due to their complex, multi-layered narrative structures, innovative uses of typography and unconventional layouts. They are novels that challenge their readers and that explore the possibilities offered by the novel medium as part of our contemporary media landscape. Despite their complex nature, they have also been found to be highly popular novels, as well as very readable texts (Graulund 379; Tanderup 149). In this thesis, I aim to discuss the factors that contribute to the apparent contradiction between their experimental features and their accessibility.

In what follows, then, I begin by offering a brief introduction to my two subject texts. I therefore first briefly summarize the plots of both *House of Leaves* and *S.*, after which I describe the novels’ most striking experimental features. After this chapter, I outline some general theoretical concepts that concern reading, the reader, and readability. These concepts inform the rest of my thesis, as I consider three ways in which the novels improve their readability. I have chosen to concentrate on the ways in which the novels construct and maintain a relatively coherent narrative centre, the ways in which they employ their

experimental features to improve immersion, and finally, the strategies they use to promote the reader's participation in meta-level play. I therefore suggest that instead of diminishing the novels' accessibility, as one might expect, the novels actually make use of their experimental features to aid the reader in their attempts to make sense of their narratives. As I argue in my analysis, then, the novels are readable partly because of their striking experimental features and not despite them. The novels manage to balance their challenging aspects with enough familiarity to allow for engaging reading experiences. As Janet H. Murray has observed, texts cannot be too restrictively challenging or too open-endedly simple if they wish to support the reading process (134-5). As such, they should ideally contain both features in order to appear readable. After this discussion, I then end my thesis with a concluding chapter that reflects on the findings of my analysis.

2 Subject Texts

In order to examine the relationship between the challenges and the support the novels offer their readers, I will first attempt to describe their most basic features. In this chapter, I therefore provide an explanation of the novels' plots, their structures, and of those main characteristics that will be later analysed from the perspective of readability.

2.1 Plot and Structure

Due to the novels' complexity, their structural features can be defined and described in a variety of ways. *House of Leaves*, for instance, can be observed to contain far more narratives and textual elements than indicated here. Similarly, the narrative structure of *S.* has not been universally agreed upon. My description below is a blend of previous suggestions and is adjusted to serve the needs of this study. As networked experimental novels, *House of Leaves* and *S.* are also composed of a collection of both physical and virtual material. Alison Gibbons describes them as central printed texts surrounded by networks of multimedia extensions (2017: 323). These extensions include related websites, social media accounts, audio-visual material and separately distributed printed material. As the main focus of my study is on the central printed novels, the following description pays more attention to these elements than to their multimedia extensions. However, as these extensions do form a part of the novels' overall narratives and as they do contribute to the readers' experience of reading them, they are nevertheless given a brief introduction.

2.1.1 *House of Leaves*

At the heart of the novel *House of Leaves* is a pseudo-academic study of a documentary film. This study is conducted by a blind old man called Zampanò, who describes and analyses the film, called *The Navidson Record*, in extreme detail. Zampanò explains that the film follows the daily life of a family who moves into a new house and discovers that their home is built

upon a haunted labyrinth. Once Zampanò dies under mysterious circumstances, his manuscript is found by Johnny Truant, a troubled tattoo apprentice who takes an interest in the old man's work. He decides to edit Zampanò's text, adding to it his own comments in the form of footnotes. Although Truant suspects that the documentary itself may not exist and that Zampanò's text is therefore a fictional horror-story, his life is nevertheless affected by the monstrous creature haunting the house Zampanò describes. In his footnotes, Truant documents his descent into madness and warns future readers of the dangers they may face while reading the text. After his breakdown, his work is completed by a group of characters referred to only as "the Editors".

In terms of its narrative structure, *House of Leaves* is what Brian McHale calls a "Chinese-box novel", meaning a novel that contains multiple narratives embedded within one another in a nested form (112-4). In other words, *House of Leaves* contains a narrative core which is embedded within another narrative, which is itself embedded within another. This core narrative is composed of the story written by Zampanò. His narrative is then embedded within that of Johnny Truant, whose comments and additions form the second narrative of the novel. Then there is the final narrative that encases Truant's commentary, added by the Editors. To reiterate, then, the novel first contains the core tale of the haunted house, as described by Zampanò. This is then framed by the story of Truant, which, in turn, is embedded within the Editors' commentary.

As for its physical structure, the book *House of Leaves* consists of a variety of textual elements. As a book of some 700 pages, *House of Leaves* contains such features as a foreword, an introduction, a body text, three sets of footnotes, three sets of appendices, and an index. These elements can be roughly divided into three sets, depending on which character is responsible for their addition. The authors of these elements can be determined on the basis of typeface, since each character's additions are printed in a specific font. These fonts have been

identified by Jessica Pressman to be Times New Roman, Courier, and Bookman (109-10). As such, the first set of physical elements contains the scholarly body text and its related footnotes added by Zampanò in Times New Roman. The next set is introduced by Johnny Truant in Courier, and it includes the introduction, the second set of footnotes, and the first appendix. Lastly, the foreword, the final set of footnotes, the final two appendices, and the index are added by the Editors and presented in Bookman (see Image 1).

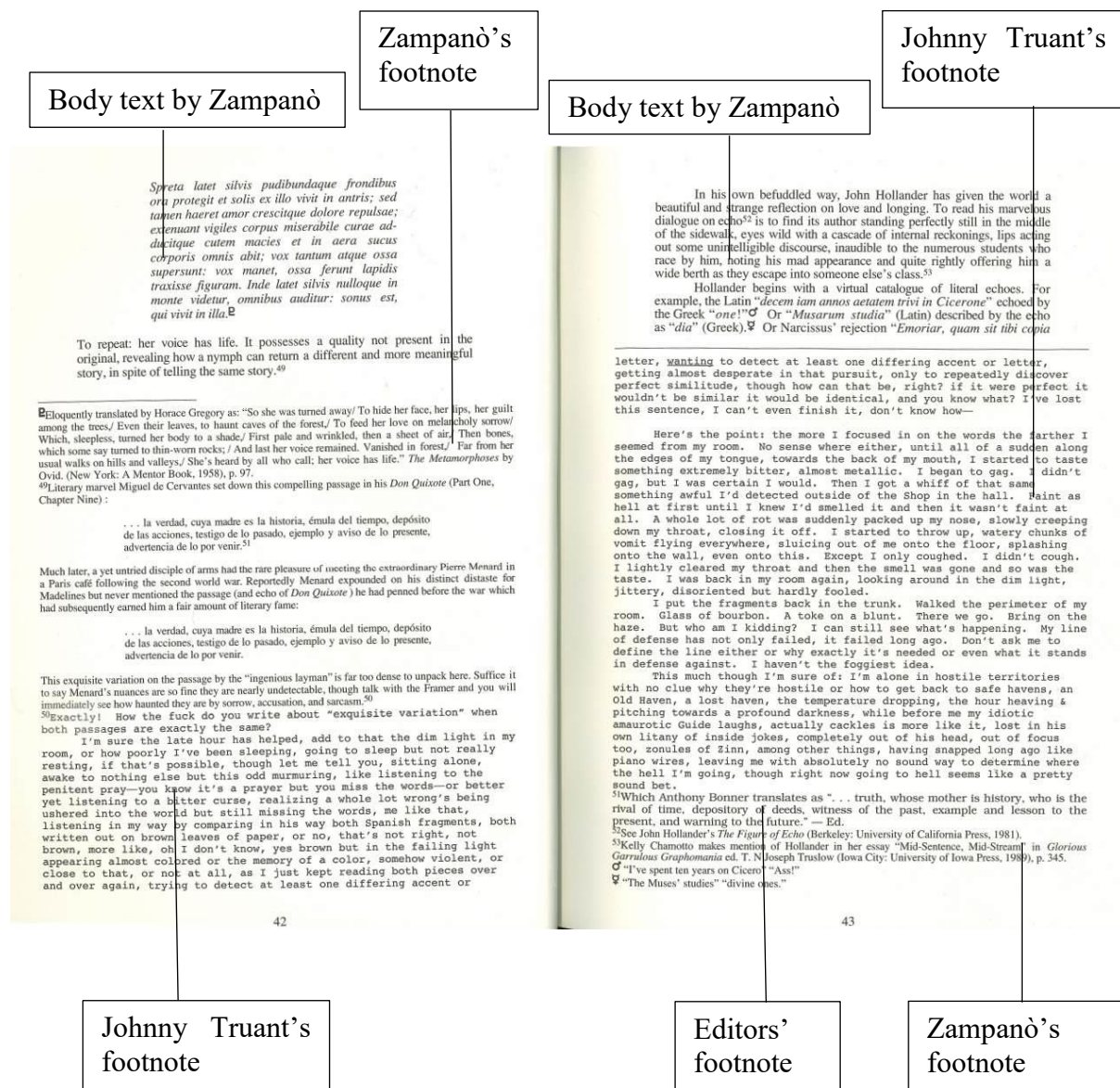


Image 1. *House of Leaves* pp. 42-3

In addition to these formal parts of text, the physical novel is also visually divided into even more fragments. At times, the text is divided into individual lines of text or even isolated words that are arranged onto the page vertically, diagonally, or upside-down. In some instances, the text is also manipulated into a shape or an image. As such, Joe Bray compares the novel to concrete poetry and prose, in which blank spaces and textual layout are as important as the text itself (298, 305). An example of these characteristics can be observed below, where Zampanò recounts a fight scene taking place in the *The Navidson Record*. The two pages first describe the trajectory of a bullet and then the impact it has on its target. Accordingly, the first page contains text shaped into the form of a bullet, and the following page represents the splintering door the bullet hits (see Image 2). As such, the novel *House of Leaves* can be observed to contain a very complex narrative structure, a highly elaborate physical structure, and an extremely diverse visual design.

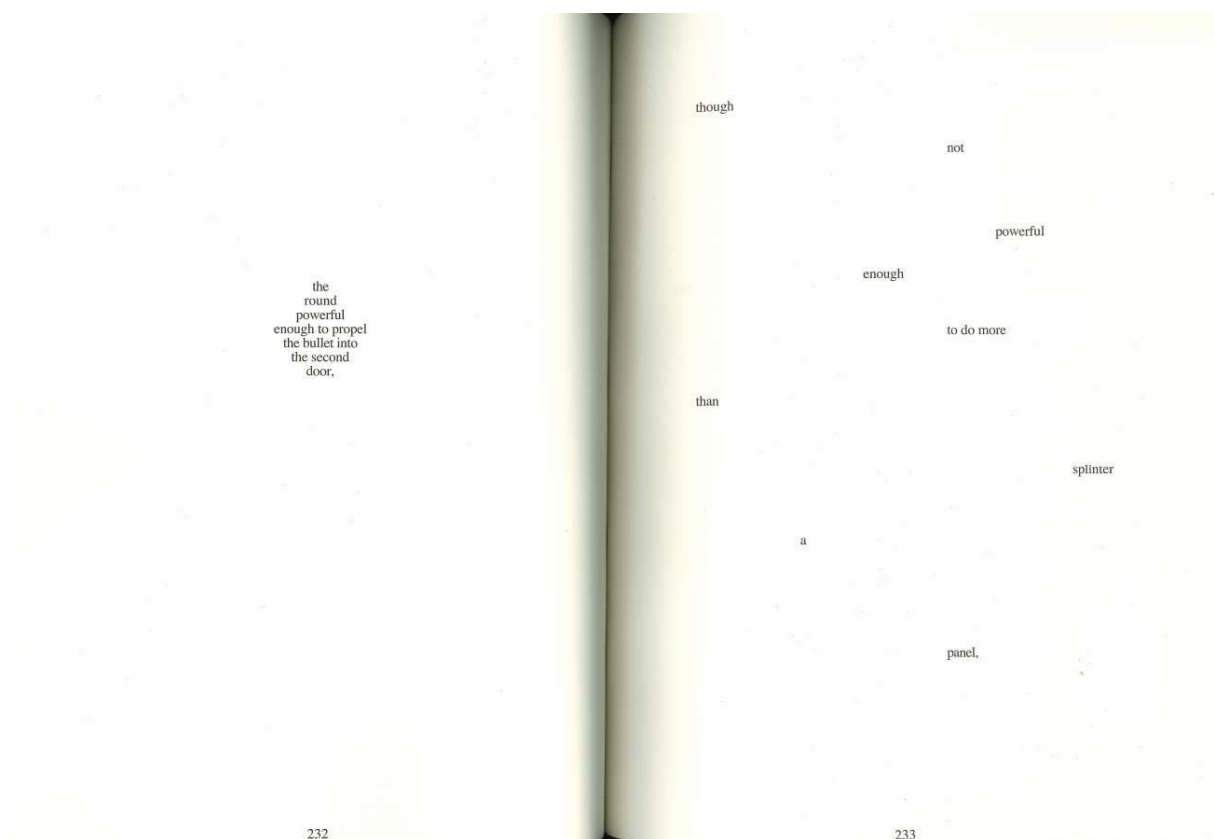


Image 2. *House of Leaves* pp. 232-3

As for the novel's multimedia extensions, Pressman cites such examples as the novel's official website, a separately published book, and a connected musical album (107-8). The website www.houseofleaves.com no longer exists, but some of its contents, such as a discussion forum related to the novel, can be found as part of the author's own homepage: www.markzdanielewski.com. The separate book, *The Whalestoe Letters*, acts as an extension to one of the novel's appendices, and the musical album *Haunted* by Danielewski's sister, singer-songwriter Poe, contains songs that have been inspired by the novel and that also make an appearance within it. Pressman suggests that these separate elements create a "feedback loop" with the novel, and as such extend and expand its narrative (107). This narrative, begun by the novel, is thus continued and developed in the other nodes of the multimedia network.

2.1.2 *S.*

S. can be described as the story of two strangers who bond over a novel filled with hidden meanings. These two characters are graduate student Eric and undergraduate Jen, who begin to communicate via a book, *Ship of Theseus*, which Jen finds in the university library. The book is owned by Eric, who has been working on discovering the identity of its mysterious author V. M. Straka. After Jen finds the book, the two characters continue this task together. The original text by Straka has been modified by editor and translator F. X. Caldeira, and the two readers notice that Caldeira has added secret messages into the novel's footnotes. As they write messages to each other, Jen and Eric eventually fall in love and decide to continue working together on the mystery they have uncovered.

Brendon Wocke describes *S.* as a "decentered novel" which contains three separate yet interlinked narratives (6). He observes that the first narrative of *S.* is composed of the fictional novel *Ship of Theseus*, written by author V. M. Straka (7). This novel contains nine chapters that describe a journey undertaken by a man who has lost his identity. This core narrative is

then added to by translator F. X. Caldeira (7). In addition to translating the novel *Ship of Theseus* from its original Czech into English, she is also responsible for completing Straka's original manuscript and editing it into a finished text. What Caldeira's additions and modifications reveal is that instead of being entirely fictional, the novel *Ship of Theseus* is partly based on fact. Her footnotes, in particular, contain coded messages that she addresses to the novel's author Straka. Wocke suggests that by means of these additions Caldeira adds another narrative into the margins of the original tale: one in which she reveals the story between herself and Straka (7). These two narratives are then built upon by the handwritten notes added by Eric and Jen (7). These notes are added at different times over the span of several months, and together they form the story of two strangers getting to know each other via the messages they write into the margins of a shared book. According to Wocke, the novel *S.* is therefore composed of the story of *Ship of Theseus*, the story of the writer Straka and translator Caldeira, and the story of Jen and Eric (7).

In terms of its physical form, the novel *S.* is composed of a slip-cover and a physical book. The slip-cover bears the novel's real-world title, whereas the book is presented as the fictional *Ship of Theseus*. It has been designed to resemble an aged library-book, complete with yellowed pages and library classification labels. This physical book contains nine chapters of body text written by author V. M. Straka. The second narrative, added by Caldeira, consists of such textual elements as the foreword, the concluding chapter of the body text, and the footnotes. Then there is the narrative composed of the notes written by the two readers. These notes can be distinguished from each other by the readers' handwriting: Eric writes in capital letters and Jen in cursive. As Sara Tanderup explains, the notes have been added at different times over the course of the two characters' investigation and can be told apart by colour:

The colors suggest that the notes were written during different readings, referring to different stages in the story of Jen and Eric: The earliest annotations are made by Eric

in faint gray pencil and apparently date back to his reading of the book as a youth. The first time that he and Jen read through the text together, Jen's notes are written in blue and Eric's are in black; the second time, Jen's are orange and Eric's green, the third time, Jen's are purple and Eric's are red, and the fourth time, both write in black (153-4).

Finally, there are the postcards and other ephemera that the two readers add between the pages of the book as time goes on. The novel *S.* therefore contains a variety of physical components: the slip-cover of *S.*, the physical book *Ship of Theseus*, the printed body text added by Straka, the printed elements added by Caldeira, five sets of handwritten notes by the readers, and, finally, the physical artefacts (see Image 3).

Concerning the novel's multimedia extensions, Gibbons observes that they include such elements as characters' Twitter accounts, a video trailer, a physical book kit, and various fan sites and discussions (2017: 326-37). The Twitter accounts, @EricHusch and @JenTheUndergrad, are claimed to belong to Eric and Jen, and they are mainly used as a means of communication between the two characters. As such, they act as a digital continuation of the messages added to the margins of the physical book. Gibbons notes that the origin of the accounts is unknown and that they might not therefore be realised by the original authors of *S.* (2017: 327-8) They are, however, sufficiently similar to the style and the content of the original work that they can be interpreted as a part of it, as opposed to being something completely separate (2017: 328).

The video trailer, entitled *Stranger*, was published by J.J. Abrams' production company Bad Robot a short while before the novel's publication and it both quotes the novel and references some of its main themes (2017: 328-9). Tanderup explains that the physical book kit published by Mulholland Books contains such features as a separate code, coloured pencils for the reader's own notes and a postcard that the actual reader can address to the fictional

character Caldeira (167-8). As for the fan sites and discussions, Tanderup mentions such examples as blogs featuring alternative endings to the fictional novel *Ship of Theseus*, some of which have been added by Dorst and some by anonymous fans (168-9).

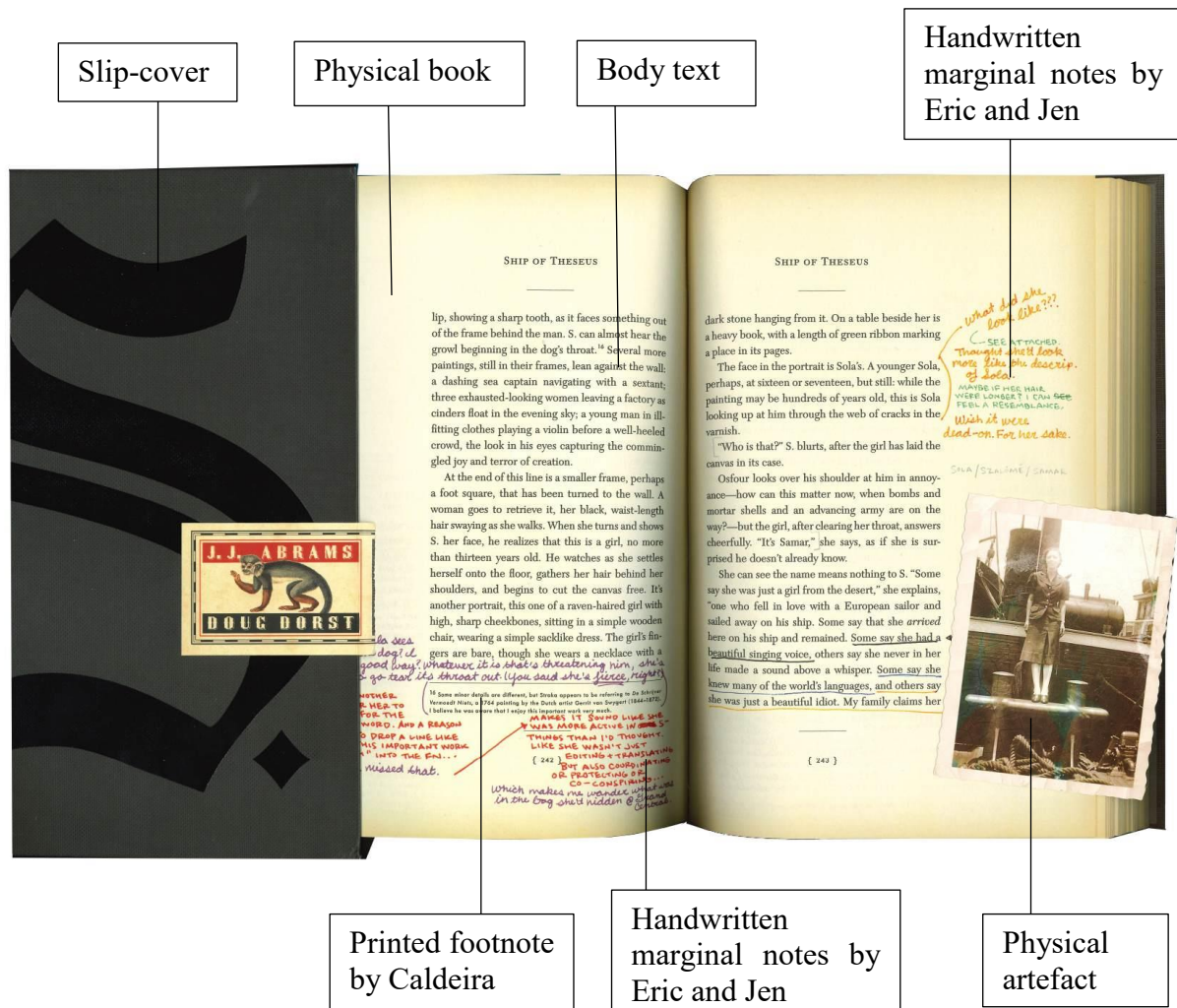


Image 3. S. pp. 242-3

2.2 Main Characteristics

Pyrhönen (4) observes that experimental fiction is widely deemed difficult due to its willingness to make use of the unexpected. As Bray et al. suggest, the unexpected often takes the form of visual experimentation, unusual textual arrangement, and suggested reader participation (9-15). This is also true of *House of Leaves* and *S.*, as they are highly visual, fragmented and interactive texts. In this section, I will be taking a closer look at these features

and will be discussing them in reference to their relevant theoretical frameworks. First, I consider the novels' fragmented structure, and connect my observations to the notion of paratext. Paratexts constitute a category of framing elements, such as titles, forewords, and footnotes, that surround body texts and form a flexible boundary between the narrative and the outside world. As such, paratexts are a useful notion for determining the roles of the novels' fragmented elements that split into body texts and their frames. Next, I describe the manner in which the various fragments are presented and joined together. The fragments of each novel are connected by various kinds of links which together form networks of narrative and text. These network structures are studied in reference to hypertext, which is a notion that can be used to consider both the internally fragmented structure of each novel and also the combinations formed between the novels and their extensions. Finally, the last section of this chapter discusses these two novels as multimodal texts. Gibbons explains that multimodal texts employ multiple modes of expression to deliver their message (2012: 2). She states that these modes include narrative content, typeface, type-setting, graphic design, and images, and that multimodal texts make use of all of them equally without privileging the narrative content over the other modes (2012: 2). Both *House of Leaves* and *S.* employ their textual content, its arrangement, and visual material in equal measure to express their story to the reader and this variety in modes is likely to have an effect on their reception.

2.2.1 Fragmentation

As can be observed from the descriptions above, the novels *House of Leaves* and *S.* are divided into multiple textual and physical fragments. These fragments are arranged to form central body texts and their frames. In *House of Leaves*, the central body text is composed of the study conducted by Zampanò. The other narratives are presented inside of the novel in the form of the foreword, the introduction, footnotes, appendices, and the index. On the outside of the novel, the narrative fragments take the form of the author's website, the separate book, and the

musical album. All of these elements, both inside and outside of the physical novel, formally surround Zampanò's central narrative. In *S.*, the central body text consists of the printed tale *Ship of Theseus* written by V. M. Straka. The other narratives take the form of the printed book, the foreword, printed footnotes, handwritten marginal notes, and physical artefacts. On the outside of the novel are the characters' social media accounts, the video trailer, the physical book kit, and fan sites and discussions. All of these elements surround the central tale by Straka.

These elements, which frame the novels' body texts, can be termed paratexts. Paratexts are, according to Gérard Genette, elements that help present texts to their readers (1). They are "thresholds" that provide access to texts by enabling readers to transition between the outside world and the contents of the text (1-2). These paratexts can be further divided into two more categories according to their physical location either inside or outside of the two physical novels. The paratexts that are situated within the same volume as the body text are what Genette terms peritexts (4-5). The peritexts of *House of Leaves* and *S.* therefore include their forewords, notes, appendices, and physical attachments. Those paratexts that exist outside of the body text and its peritexts, are called epitexts (5), and in the case of these novels they include the various digital and analogue extensions that interact with their narratives from the outside, including the social media accounts, video trailers, musical albums and book kits.

Although these peritexts and epitexts appear to form a boundary between the novels' body texts and the real world, they are not actual paratexts. Instead, they form a part of the novels' fiction and as such are fictional paratexts. In addition to these fictional paratexts, both novels also include actual paratexts. These include such examples as the slip-cover of *S.*, the copyright statements of *House of Leaves*, and separately published authors' interviews. The novels therefore contain both fictional and factual paratexts, that take the form of peritexts and epitexts, and these two kinds of paratexts are situated alongside each other. In other words, fictional peritexts are situated amongst factual peritexts, and fictional epitexts are situated

amongst factual epitexts. This strategy blurs the boundary between the two kinds of paratexts, and by doing so it also blurs the boundary between fiction and fact. The coexistence of the two kinds of paratexts allows fictional paratexts to blend in with actual paratexts and therefore to act as if they, too, were actual thresholds between the real world and the body texts they surround. This aims to make the fictional paratexts appear as if they were a part of the real world as opposed to the fictional narratives they actually belong to.

In what ways, then, do the two novels disguise narrative content as actual paratexts? In *S.*, the most striking example is provided by the physical appearance of the book *Ship of Theseus*. The fictional book has the appearance of an actual aged library book complete with convincing publishing details, yellowing pages, physical library classification labels, and library stamps. Naturally, these details are all fictional, and their fictional status becomes immediately obvious to anyone who pays attention to them. The publisher the novel refers to, for instance, is the fictional Winged Shoes Press, and the library it claims to belong to is the fictional Laguna Verde High School Library. By having a factual appearance within the real world, the covers of the book and their formal features create the illusion that they are actual paratexts. As such, they aim to make the novel *Ship of Theseus* seem like an actual novel.

The copyright page of *House of Leaves* also contains elements that behave in a similar manner. The page mixes such factual details as the year and place of publishing, information on the publisher, and cataloguing information with such unusual fictional features as the words “First Edition” written in purple ink and struck through by a line, as well as the following statement:

This novel is a work of fiction. Any references to real people, events, establishments, organizations or locales are intended only to give the fiction a sense of reality and authenticity. Other names, characters and incidents are either the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously, as are those fictionalized events and incidents

which involve real persons and did not occur or are set in the future. — Ed.
(Danielewski, iv)

This statement imitates factual paratexts by appearing alongside them and by adopting their linguistic conventions. It therefore has both the physical appearance of a factual paratext and a convincingly formulated paratextual message. It is only the reference to future events that suggests that this is not necessarily a factual statement. By means of such misleading paratexts the novel aims to make the fictional Editors appear as real people who have actually modified Truant and Zampanò's combined work.

In addition to these peritextual elements, the two novels also employ their epitexts to confuse the line between fiction and fact. Both Gibbons and Pressman suggest that despite their distance from the body text, the epitextual extensions, such as the websites and social media accounts, have clear roles as part of the novels' narratives. Pressman, for instance, argues that the extensions of *House of Leaves* provide their reader with clues as to the origin and authenticity of the narratives presented in the printed novel (114-7). Similarly, Gibbons states that the multimedia additions of *S.* both expand and modify the novel's narrative and develop the reader's experience of it (2017: 336-7). They are nevertheless physically separate from the novels, and the reader is not necessarily even aware of their existence. Their convincing appearance and their placement among actual epitexts, such as related websites and social media accounts that do not form a part of the narrative, make them appear as if they, too, were such factual epitexts. The social media accounts of Eric and Jen, for example, toy with the idea of these two characters being actual people.

Since the novels' narratives are thus not solely contained within their body texts but take the form of paratexts and blend in with their actual frames, they begin to blur the line between fiction and the real world. By doing so, the two novels bring their narrative content close to the reader and make reading the novels a particularly immersive experience. However,

as this immersion is created by the coexistence of factual and fictional paratexts that are scattered across various multimedia platforms, the extent of the immersion depends on the reader's own activity in seeking them out and distinguishing between them.

2.2.2 Network Structure

By presenting their narratives in a fragmented form, the printed books *House of Leaves* and *S.* offer their readers multiple sets of narrative and textual material at once. As Sabine Zubarik explains, this parallel material forces its reader to choose a specific order and manner in which to advance through it (7). Not every element can be taken into account at once, which is why some fragments must be left momentarily unread. They can then be returned to once the other, simultaneously offered material has been worked through (8). Although both novels are thus composed of simultaneously presented fragments of narrative material, these fragments are not completely separate from each other. Instead, they are joined by means of various types of links, which can be discussed further as features of hypertext.

In *Hypertext 2.0*, George Landow explains that the term hypertext refers primarily to electronic texts (3). He describes them as being one step further from the analogue systems that function in a similar way. He uses the scholarly text composed of a body text and connected notes as an example of such an analogue system, and states that instead of being hypertext, this kind of text constitutes a precursor for its more advanced electronic counterparts (4). The main difference between the two, according to Landow, is the ease and the extent of access the links in electronic hypertexts offer to their readers in contrast to the potentially less accessible and more time-consuming physical links of printed texts (4). Accordingly, he terms such analogue counterparts as “print proto-hypertexts” (38) or, in reference to works of fiction, “quasi-hypertextual fictions” (189).

In his analysis of *S.*, Wocke nevertheless discusses the printed novel as an example of hypertext. He overlooks the question of medium and instead focuses on the functional

similarities between *S.* and Landow's definition of hypertexts. As such, he disregards the question of ease and speed of access, and instead concentrates on other features of hypertext that are common to both electronic texts and such experimental multimedia texts as *S.* In particular, Wocke refers to a specific instance in Landow's analysis which describes hypertext as being non-hierarchical, dynamic, and non-sequential, and he then proceeds to analyse *S.* from this perspective (9-10). As an example of these characteristics, Wocke discusses the process of deciphering the codes added to the novel's printed footnotes by the fictional translator F. X. Caldeira. He explains how one particular encrypted message hidden in the footnotes of the final chapter can only be solved by using a physical code wheel, which is provided at the back of the novel (11). Once decrypted, the code will deliver two different messages: one revealing a personal message sent by Caldeira to the novel's author Straka, and the other indicating her location in case Straka wished to contact her (12). This second message is further tied in with a physical postcard sent by Eric to Jen from the location it indicates (12). This postcard is set apart from the code, leaving it up to the reader to make the connection between the code and the postcard (12). This example aptly demonstrates the non-hierarchical structure of the text, since the footnotes and the added artefacts are clearly not mere supplements or additions to the body text but actively develop the overall narratives of author Straka, translator Caldeira, and the two readers. The example shows that the text is also dynamic, since its meaning changes according to the actions of the reader. Furthermore, it is also non-sequential, as the reader is invited to advance through it the order of their choosing, there being no overarching linear path for the reader to advance through.

In his discussion on *House of Leaves*, Juha-Pekka Kilpiö prefers to employ the term "cybertext" suggested by Espen J. Aarseth, which has the advantage of not differentiating between electronic and analogue texts (59). By this term he nevertheless means hypertext in the sense that it is used here. In his analysis, Kilpiö offers a useful outline of the hypertextual

logic of *House of Leaves*. As he explains, the novel contains separate fragments of narrative and text that are spread out across the novel and organised in various patterns that are all connected by means of two kinds of links (61-3). Both types employ superscript symbols that refer from the source of the link to its destination (62). The first type of link contains the traditional superscript number that links one fragment of text to its pair, indicated by that same number. The next type, in contrast, contains superscript symbols, which, in the instances referred to by Kilpiö, have been given the form of the international ground-to-air emergency code (63). Instead of having fragments of text linked together by means of superscript numbers, in these instances the fragments are connected with symbols signifying such messages as “require medical supplies” or “unable to proceed”. As Kilpiö observes, although these two types of links do both attach one fragment of text to another and thus function in an identical way, they do nevertheless require different approaches from the reader (63). The numbered links conform to an order, and the reader can therefore expect to find sequential links in some proximity of each other. Kilpiö explains that when looking for the fragment indicated by the superscript number 133, for instance, the reader automatically knows to expect it near fragments 132 and 134 (63). The links indicated by symbols, however, are far less intuitive to locate. In their case, the reader will have to search for them in a different way and try to actively connect the source link to its destination (63). At times, the same link may come up after a long while and the reader may need to remember the location of the previous link with the same signifier.

As is the case with *S.*, the reader is thus invited to proceed through a non-hierarchical text that develops according to the reader’s actions. However, as Kilpiö observes, *House of Leaves* is expected to be read in full and in more or less the order indicated by sequential links (63). The reader is therefore not invited to proceed through the text in a completely arbitrary order or to favour certain links at the expense of others, but to follow the links in the order they

indicate and to the extent they require (63). As such, *House of Leaves* can be observed to contain a more sequential structure than *S*. This results from the novel's more explicitly marked links, as opposed to the more implicit links of *S*.

In addition to linking together textual elements within the printed novels themselves, hypertextual links also form connections between the novels and their multimedia extensions, as well as between the novels and other texts. As Pressman observes, the links between *House of Leaves* and its extensions include such examples as Johnny Truant's description of a song called "Five and a Half Minute Hallway", which links to an actual song with the same name that appears on Poe's album *Haunted* (114-6). As for *S*, similar examples include the references Eric and Jen make to topics and themes of *Ship of Theseus* on their social media accounts. *House of Leaves* and *S* also contain links to actual works of literature and literary theory, such as *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot and Jacques Derrida's *Writing and Difference*. Since these kinds of links involve texts situated outside of the novels themselves, their importance as part of the narrative depends on the reader's willingness to notice and follow them.

As can be observed, then, both novels employ separate narrative and textual elements joined together by various means that function according to the extent of the reader's participation. Due to this highly fragmented and scattered structure, these novels may at first appear non-linear. However, as Landow points out in reference to hypertexts, "[d]oing away with a fixed linear text . . . neither necessarily does away with all linearity nor removes formal coherence, though coherence may appear in new and unexpected forms" (186). As such, "[l]inearity . . . then becomes a quality of the individual reader's experience within a single text and his or her experience following a reading path, even if that path curves back upon itself or heads in strange directions" (184). The fact that the novels are not composed of unified stretches of text spread out evenly across their pages does not therefore necessarily mean that

the process of reading them is not linear. Instead, what the novels offer is a different kind of linearity, one that depends on the reader's own activity and experience.

2.2.3 Multimodality

Both *House of Leaves* and *S.* are what Alison Gibbons refers to as multimodal printed novels, meaning novels that deliver a story using more than one communicative mode at once (2012). In the case of *House of Leaves*, for instance, the narrative is communicated to the reader not only via text, but also through the visual arrangement of the text and through the physical movements the text encourages its reader to perform. Gibbons states that the communicative modes used in such examples of multimodal fiction have a vital role in communicating the narrative to the reader, and that therefore these aspects should not be mistaken for mere trivial additions to the text (2012: 86). The physical design of *House of Leaves* is therefore not separate from the narrative it aims to communicate but is actively forming it in cooperation with the text. In her analysis, Gibbons provides an example of the multimodal features used to communicate the novel's narrative by describing a section where the pages are divided up into multiple text-boxes (see Image 5). The section describes a part of the documentary film, in which a group of explorers enters the labyrinth that has emerged within the house owned by Navidson and his family. As the group proceeds through the labyrinth in the narrative, the text on the page itself turns into a similar labyrinthine structure. Gibbons describes the structure as clusters of text made distinct by means of borders, empty space, typeface, and direction of text (2012: 67-9). As the reader navigates through the section, they will be inclined to turn the book around in order to read each cluster, and therefore replicate the actions of the group of explorers described in the text (2012: 69). What makes this section particularly multimodal, then, is the fact that the narrative content of exploring through a labyrinth is communicated both through text and through the layout of that text.

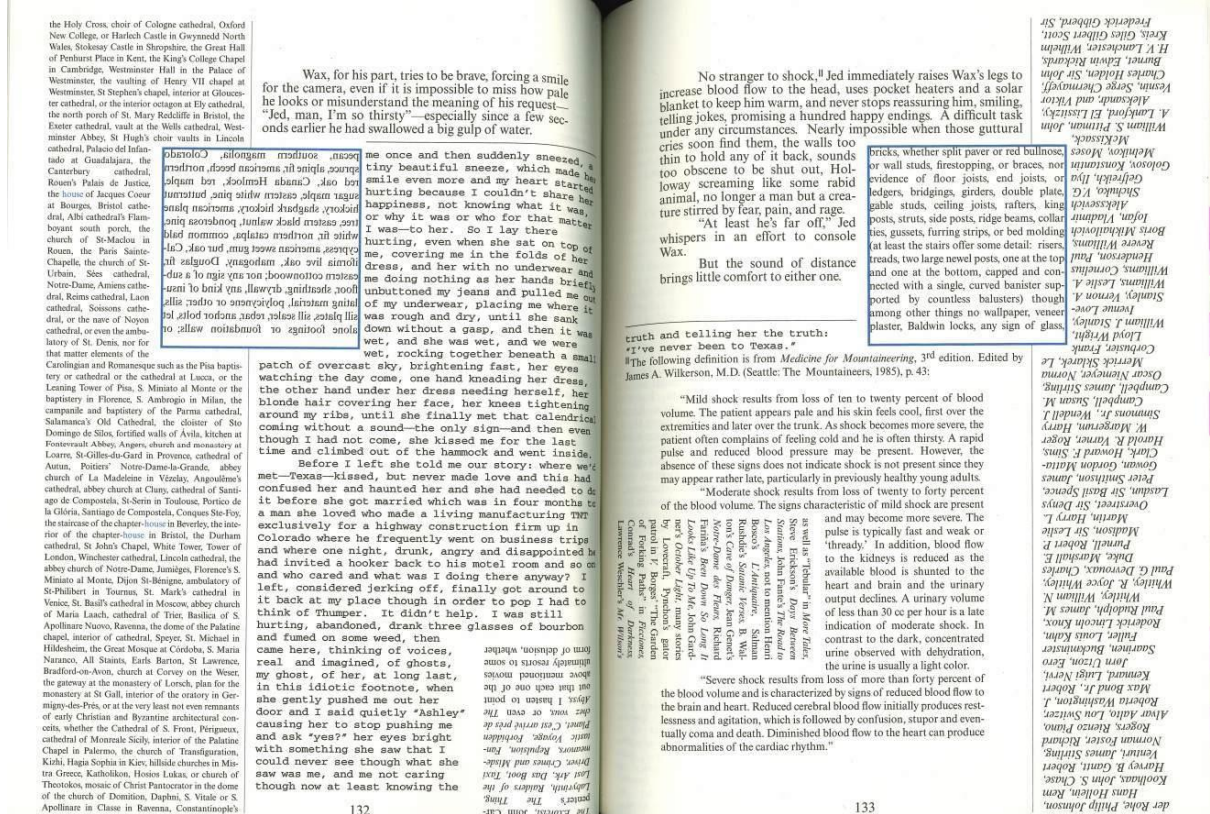


Image 5. *House of Leaves* pp. 132-3

Since multimodal printed novels communicate their narratives by means of multiple modes simultaneously, they require their readers to engage with the texts in more than one way. In the above example of text structured in the form of a labyrinth, the reader is encouraged to interact with the physical book in order to access the narrative in its entirety. The ideal reader of the novel would therefore be an active one, who takes part in the activities prompted by the text and its layout. If the design requires a simple manoeuvre, such as turning the book upside down for a brief moment, the role of the active ideal reader is easily adopted. In such a case, the complex layout will not be a likely cause of reading difficulties. However, if the task required is challenging enough, the reader may opt to not perform the suggested action. In this instance, the narrative may lose some aspects of its meaning. Gibbons (2012) offers an example of such a possibility in her analysis on Jonathan Safran Foer's *Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close*. The novel contains a numerically coded section that represents a character's attempt to

communicate over the telephone using only the dial-up sounds of a key pad. Gibbons observes that the task of decoding this particular passage is extremely challenging and concludes that readers of the text are therefore likely not to fully commit to it (2012: 155). However, she then demonstrates that even if most readers do not complete the process of decoding, the meaning of the section will change depending on whether they first attempt the suggested action, or whether they completely ignore it (2012: 155). The character behind the coded message is trying to reach another character who, like the reader, does not understand the code. The message the second character receives is a set of dial-up sounds that correspond to the keys pressed by the first character. If the reader begins to decrypt the message, but eventually gives up due to the difficulty of the task, they will experience the same frustration as the receiving character. In this case, the reader will successfully receive the multimodal meaning the code is attempting to communicate (2012: 156). In contrast, if they choose to skip over this section, they will miss the second character's frustration that is embedded into the action of decoding. In other words, even though no verbal meaning will be lost, the added multimodal message will be accidentally overlooked.

Gibbons then notes that in addition to prompting physical interaction between the reader and the book, multimodal novels also encourage interaction on a cognitive level (2012: 75). She observes that since multimodal texts communicate through multiple sensory means in equal measure, they naturally draw attention to themselves as material objects. They are "opaque" as opposed to the more conventionally "transparent" texts (2012: 114). What this means is that more conventional novels typically follow the standard form of printed literature and therefore aim to direct the reader's focus away from the physical page to the narrative content that lies "beyond" the unremarkable surface (2012: 114). Multimodal novels, in contrast, expect attention to be focused on both levels simultaneously, as both are equally important to their form of communication (2012: 114). The result of this expectation is that it

can potentially complicate the reading process and prevent complete immersion (2012: 113). As Gibbons explains, reading multimodal fiction requires a “perceptual fluctuation between looking *at* the material surface of the page and looking *through* the page”, which can interfere with the task of reading if the reader does not adjust their reading strategies (2012: 115). A successful reading strategy to use when reading multimodal texts, then, would be an active and self-conscious one, where the reader identifies the physical and cognitive actions required by the text, and also understands the significance of those actions. A successful reader will therefore perform the suggested actions and realise their role in acting out a part of the text’s meaning and thus in a sense co-creating the narrative together with the author.

3 Reading and Readability

After having outlined the novels' storylines and their shared experimental features, I will now introduce certain relevant theories of reading and readability. First, I concentrate on the act of reading and review certain ways of perceiving the reading process. After this, I pay closer attention to the participants and participant roles involved. Since these representations are highly hypothetical, I will also include some critical observations to indicate the potential shortcomings of my approach. This discussion will then be followed by a definition of readability that prepares the way for a deeper analysis on how to explain the novels' surprising accessibility.

3.1 Reading

As Susan R. Suleiman observes in her introduction to *The Reader in the Text*, audience-oriented criticism is an extremely varied field of study (1980: 6). There is no single way to conceive of reading or of the reading subject, and no approach can claim to be superior to another (1980: 6). As such, the approach adopted in this thesis is a mix of multiple ways to think about the act of reading. This chapter will first outline the basics of the reading process by discussing the different components involved. Instead of focusing on only one model of reading, I will first describe a selection of the most relevant theories and then combine them into a blend that will best serve the purposes of this study. Next, I shift my focus onto the different participant roles of reading and outline the theoretical concepts of Wayne C. Booth and Peter J. Rabinowitz. Booth's approach serves as an introduction to the division between actual and implied participants, and Rabinowitz functions as a way to elaborate on Booth's concepts. Finally, this chapter ends on the observation that since all theoretical conceptualizations of reading are merely hypothetical, none of them can be taken as the absolute truth. As such, I acknowledge the fact that while my observations of reading may be valid in the context of this particular paper, there may be multiple alternative ways to view the same subject matter. By adding this

final subsection to my discussion, I wish to indicate that I concur with Suleiman when she disputes the existence of a “single homogenous reading . . . public” (1980: 37). My aim here is thus not to pretend that the results of my analysis are a universally valid representation of the act of reading my two subject texts, but that it is instead simply one possible way of generalizing the experience of reading them.

3.1.1 The Reading Process

According to Gerald Prince, the activity of reading involves three features: the text, the reader, and the interaction between the two. The first of these features, the text, typically contains a message which is intended for a reader. The second feature, the reader, is the recipient of the text’s message, and the final feature, the interaction between the two, is what transfers the message from the text to the reader. By interacting with the text, the reader will thus ideally be able to identify the message the text contains and grasp the meaning it attempts to convey. (Prince 225)

Other theorists, such as Tzvetan Todorov and Wolfgang Iser build their views of reading onto the same principles as Prince. They therefore both agree that reading is an act of communication that originates from a source and ends up in the mind of a receiver (Todorov 73; Iser 106). The term “source” in this instance refers primarily to an author, and the term “receiver” signifies the reader. Although both Todorov and Iser define the act of reading as a transaction in which the author forms and articulates a message which is then presented to and decoded by the reader, they also raise the important question of how this seemingly straightforward process can allow for as much variation as it does. Even though each act of reading can be schematically described as a straightforward transfer of meaning, the message is very rarely fixed in content as it advances from the source to the receiver. There is always a possibility that the reader interprets the text in a way that is different to what the author

intended, and individual readers can also interpret the message very differently from each other. (Todorov 72; Iser 107)

According to Todorov, this phenomenon can be explained by the fact that reading is based on acts of reconstruction (72-3). Each author uses the written word as a way to convey certain specific messages and ideas to their audience. However, the messages and ideas are very rarely expressed explicitly within texts. Instead, they are frequently hidden behind various subtle clues and indications. The readers of texts then use these clues and indications to try to reconstruct the original full meanings intended by the author. Such full reconstruction is rarely achieved, however, and this fact explains the variety of possible interpretations available for each text. (Todorov 73) Wolfgang Iser agrees that although the author of each text can attempt to guide their audience to specific ways of understanding their work, it is also the readers' own activity that influences the way the text is understood (106). In Iser's terms, the act of reading consists of interaction between what the author reveals and what the author conceals in their writing (111). The revealed elements first guide the reader's interpretation into a certain direction, while the concealed elements give the reader freedom to insert their own additions to the text (111-2). The final interpretation that the reader reaches is therefore the result of the interplay between what is explicitly stated and what is left unspecified (111-2).

What these statements suggest, then, is that texts contain both guidance and open ends that manoeuvre the reader's interpretation towards one that is both unique to them and also sufficiently similar to the original one intended by the author. Exactly how this navigation process works is left unclear, however, as is the question of how much freedom texts ultimately offer their readers. Suleiman observes that Iser, in particular, fails to give a conclusive answer to the question of whether it is the source or the receiver who has more power in deciding what each text fundamentally means (1980: 22-5). The approach adopted in this thesis is a compromise between different viewpoints and is based on the idea that while experimental

texts such as *House of Leaves* and *S.* are designed by their authors to be read and interacted with in certain ways, the reader is also given the choice to either conform to or reject these designs. In *House of Leaves*, for instance, Danielewski may have intended the novel's labyrinth section to be manipulated in a way that highlights its multimodal and expressive qualities, yet the reader may well be unable or unwilling to read these qualities into the text. The author cannot therefore fully anticipate how the reader is going to approach their work, and conversely the reader cannot fully grasp what the author has ultimately meant by each addition. The author can, however, anticipate ways in which they hope their text to be read and the reader can first attempt to identify the directions the author has embedded into the text and then choose to either follow or ignore these directions. The following section will attempt to elaborate on these ideas by outlining the different roles authors and readers have available to them while composing and reading texts.

3.1.2 Participant Roles of Literary Communication

Instead of consisting of interaction between only one source and one receiver, the communication process of literature is actually far more complex. Wayne C. Booth in his work *The Rhetoric of Fiction* agrees that literature involves a message being sent from a source, the author, to a receiver, the reader. However, he also argues that these two agents of the communication process operate on two different levels. Each author exists both as an actual author and an implied author, and the reader exists as an actual reader and an implied reader (71-6, 138-9).

The terms actual author and actual reader refer to the real-life author and the real-life reader of each text. The real-life author is the physical person behind a literary work and the real-life reader is the physical reader who reads this work. Since these two agents are real, physical individuals with distinct backgrounds, personalities, identities, preferences, and motivations, they cannot be accurately analysed on a purely theoretical level (75-6, 137-8). The

only way to study actual authors and actual readers is to rely on their own accounts of their writing and reading processes. This approach has been adopted by such critics as Norman Holland in his work *5 Readers Reading*.

The only versions of authors and readers that can be studied purely on the basis of literary texts are therefore the implied author and the implied reader. The implied author is composed of the evidence the actual author leaves behind as they write their work. It therefore consists of all the rhetorical and artistic choices the author has made while setting their words on paper. Each author makes different rhetorical and artistic choices depending on the needs of each specific text they write, and each text therefore has their own unique kind of implied author (70-1). The implied author does not thus exist outside of the literary work but is embedded within it as “the sum of [the author’s] own choices” (74-5). As Suleiman aptly summarizes, the implied author is “the shadowy but overriding presence who is responsible for every aspect of the work and whose image must be constructed (or rather, reconstructed) in the act of reading” (1980: 8).

The implied reader is a similar theoretical concept that exists only as part of the text and not outside of it. Instead of the reader’s “ordinary self”, it is an image of the reader the author creates while creating an implied image of themselves (138). It is the audience literary texts address and the audience each text is designed for. The properties of this imagined audience can be deduced from the way literary texts are written. It is also a guide of sorts that provides the actual reader with a model on how to approach the text. In Suleiman’s terms, it is “created by the work and functions, in a sense, as the work’s ideal interpreter. Only by agreeing to play the role of this created audience for the duration of his/her reading can an actual reader correctly understand and fully appreciate the work” (1980: 8).

In addition to the author and reader, who exist both as actual people and as implied versions of themselves, each text also involves a separate narrator and a separate narrative

audience. According to Booth, the term narrator commonly refers to the speaker or the “I” of a literary text (73). The narrator of a text thus exists strictly within the narrative and not outside of it. Although this is also true of the implied author, they are nevertheless fully distinct concepts (73). The narrator is one of the elements that together constitute a narrative, whereas the implied author is a theoretical concept that can be inferred from the way a narrative is told. Since the implied author is responsible for every aspect of a narrative, they are also responsible for the narrator. In other words, the implied author creates the narrator (73).

Peter J. Rabinowitz further develops the notions of author and audience by creating a different kind of categorization. Firstly, he reconsiders the notion of author. In contrast to Booth’s distinction between two types of authors and a separate narrator, Rabinowitz’ classification seems to conflate the two authors together into one single author. When discussing James Joyce and Vladimir Nabokov, for example, he seems to be speaking of them as both actual people and as the impressions he receives of them through their writing (126). Instead of differentiating between the actual and the implied author, then, Rabinowitz seems to group both under the simple term of “author”. This single author is then paired with a separate narrator (127).

Next, Rabinowitz reconsiders the notion of audience. Instead of dividing the audience into actual readers and implied readers, Rabinowitz speaks of four different types of audiences. The first of these audiences is the “actual audience” which largely corresponds to Booth’s actual reader and, as such, refers to the physical, real-life readers of a text (126). The next type is what Rabinowitz calls the “authorial audience”, which is the hypothetical audience each author imagines their work to have (126-7). The third type is the “narrative audience” (127-9), and the final type is the “ideal narrative audience” (134-6). As Rabinowitz explains, all of these types are “conscious audience roles implied in the text” (128). By this he means that they are different levels of reading that the actual reader can operate on simultaneously (130). As such,

they are intended as a framework for explaining the different roles each reader can potentially adopt as they read fiction (130).

According to Rabinowitz, these four audience roles can be divided into two categories depending on whether they are seen as the author's audiences or the narrator's audiences. The author's audiences consist of those audience roles that the author of a literary text addresses their words to. Rabinowitz suggests that these two audiences are the actual audience and the authorial audience (125-7). The narrator's audiences, in contrast, include those audiences that the narrator situated within a literary work addresses their words to. These audiences, then, are the narrative audience and the ideal narrative audience (127-9, 134-6).

The first of the author's audiences is therefore the actual audience. Since it largely corresponds to Booth's notion of the actual reader, not much can be said about it on a hypothetical level. As Rabinowitz observes, this is the audience the author and the bookseller have the most interest in and the one the actual author has very little control over (126).

The second of the author's audiences is the authorial audience (126). As Rabinowitz explains, each author designs their text for a specific audience. Each author therefore decides what to write and how to write it based on the hypothetical audience they imagine their work to have. All decisions concerning how a narrative is told, how a text is structured, and what prior knowledge is required are all based on this imagined authorial audience. A novel which centres on a particular historical event, for instance, may be written for an authorial audience who is expected to be well acquainted with it. This novel is thus aimed at an authorial audience who is able to both recognize the event in question and understand its significance as part of that particular narrative. In order to address their work to this hypothetical imagined audience, the author of the novel may choose to write it in a way that does not explicitly introduce or explain the event. (Rabinowitz 126)

Although every text is therefore designed for a specific authorial audience, it will nevertheless eventually be read by an actual audience which may or may not correspond to the original prediction. The better the authorial and the actual audiences correspond, the more likely it is that the text will have its intended artistic effect (126-7). If this is not the case and the authorial audience is very different from the actual one, the actual readers of the text may be unable or unwilling to appreciate it (126-7). If a novel is expected to be read by a set of readers who possess prior knowledge of a particular topic, for instance, it will be written in a specific way. If the actual readers who eventually read the text do not then possess the expected background knowledge, there will be no correlation between assumption and reality. In such a case, the actual audience will likely fail to appreciate the text as originally intended.

However, since the authorial audience is always hypothetical, there will inevitably be some difference between the author's expectation and reality (127). Seeing as the author can never fully predict what their audience as a whole and each individual reader separately requires of a text, they cannot be held solely responsible for the artistic success of their work. This means that actual readers are also responsible for minimizing the gap between assumption and reality by acquiring the necessary knowledge the text presupposes and by adopting the behaviours and attitudes it requires to function (127). If a reader wishes to appreciate a novel whose artistic effect depends on their familiarity with a given topic, they must therefore take active steps to acquire the necessary knowledge (126). They should identify the kind of authorial audience the text requires and then adopt some of this audience's characteristics (126).

In the case of an experimental text such as *House of Leaves*, for instance, the author is likely to consider how many and what kinds of reading challenges the hypothetical eventual reader can be expected to accept before they abandon the novel in frustration. The author therefore invents an authorial audience who is willing to take part in a certain number of

activities prompted by the text, but who will likely reject others. As explained in section 2.2.3, a short section of *House of Leaves* is printed in the form of a labyrinth. For the duration of this section, the novel expects the reader to turn the physical book around in their hands in order to read paragraphs printed sideways and upside down. The novel therefore presupposes an imagined audience who agrees to act in this way while reading the text. The length of the section and the quality of the required action are designed to suit the authorial audience in a way that will not lessen their motivation to continue reading. The actual readers who decide to mirror the example set by the authorial audience will take part in the suggested activity and will consequently grasp the multimodal meaning the structure of the text conveys. Readers who do not engage in this activity are more likely to miss this added artistic effect. The fact that the activity prompted in this section is very easy to realise means that it is very easy for the actual audience to agree to it. Actual readers will in all probability turn the book around in their hands and thus act the way the author had expected. In this case, the actual and the authorial audiences will be very similar, and the work will likely have its intended artistic effect. Although in the case of this example the author has already minimized the potential gap between the two audiences in a way that will most probably produce an ideal end result, it is nevertheless the reader's responsibility to imitate the authorial audience. If the reader of *House of Leaves* wishes to experience the novel as intended by the author, they should recognize the actions required of the authorial audience and accomplish them in the expected manner.

Then there are the narrator's audiences. The first of these is what Rabinowitz calls the narrative audience. He defines it as the fictional audience the narrator of a text addresses as they recount the events and experiences of their narrative (127). Rabinowitz begins his explanation by stating that novels frequently aim to imitate nonfictional texts (127). Despite being fiction, then, novels often take on the appearance of historically accurate factual texts, such as records of past events or biographies (127). In such instances, the narrator tends to

adopt the characteristics of an author (127). By imitating a factual author who describes historically accurate scenes, the narrator addresses a specific kind of audience that is willing to accept the factuality of their words. This, the narrative audience, is therefore intended as an audience that believes that the events and the characters described in the text are real and have existed in the reality the narrator and the narrative audience share. As this is another audience role, this narrative audience is not a real audience or a type of actual audience that is expected to exist outside of the fictional text. Instead, it is a role that the actual reader can adopt as they read the text in order to experience it as intended (127).

In order to take on the role of a specific text's narrative audience, each reader should consider which fictional events and features the novel expects its narrative audience to believe (128). In other words, which are the elements that the actual reader should pretend to believe in order to join the narrative audience and therefore to understand the narrative in the expected way (128). Rabinowitz provides an example by discussing the narrative audience of the fairy-tale *Cinderella* (129). As he explains, the tale expects its narrative audience to believe in the existence of certain unrealistic beings, since the narrator describes a world and a situation in which Cinderella has a literal fairy godmother. If the actual reader is to understand the narrator's description in this manner, as is intended, they must take on the role of the narrative audience who believes this to be the case. If the actual reader fails to adopt the narrative reader's role, or if they refuse to do so, they will likely misunderstand the tale. The actual reader will therefore not accept that Cinderella is a person with a fairy godmother but may instead only see the situation through the lens of reality. They will not take on the role of an audience that believes in fairy godmothers but will consider what such a claim would most likely mean in the real world: "A reader who refuses to pretend to so believe will see Cinderella as a neurotic, perhaps psychotic, young woman subject to hallucinations." (129)

Since such experimental novels as *House of Leaves* and *S.* are composed of multiple, layered narratives, the process of analysing their narrative audiences is considerably more challenging than in the case of the above example. As described in section 2.1, both of these novels contain at least three narratives, and each of these narratives have their own narrators. It follows, then, that each of these narrators have their own narrative audiences. *House of Leaves*, for instance, includes Zampanò's core tale, Truant's additions and comments, and the Editors' commentary. These three narratives are composed by three narrators and are intended for their own narrative audiences. The novel could be argued to contain even more narratives, narrators, and narrative audiences than those considered here, but these will nevertheless suffice for the scope of this present study.

Due to the novel's fragmented structure, these three narratives are situated amongst each other in a way that allows them to interact with and influence each other. The narratives are therefore not fully separate, since Zampanò's work is added to by Truant's commentary, and both Zampanò and Truant's words are built upon by the Editors' analyses. Each narrator's narrative audience therefore believes certain claims the narrators make of their own situation and character as well as certain claims they make of the other narrators' narratives. However, they also disbelieve certain other claims the narrators make of these topics if they work against what they already know of the world they inhabit. To illustrate, Zampanò's narrative is set in a world very similar to ours, in which the supernatural events of *The Navidson Record* are considered impossible. The film is set in the state of Virginia in early 1990's America (8-9), and Zampanò expresses early on the improbability of its events. He describes the house and its interior as "impossible" (4) and "bizarre" (5) and observes that the supernatural nature of its contents frequently causes it to be mistaken for an elaborate hoax (3-7). Even if Zampanò's narrative audience believes that he is a real author, then, they are nevertheless likely to consider that he has invented the fantastic tale of Navidson and his haunted house since the existence of

such a house is considered impossible within the world they share. Truant exists within the same world as Zampanò, and his narrative audience is therefore likely to believe in his existence as well as believe some of his judgements on what aspects of Zampanò's narrative are likely to be factual within their shared reality. However, they are unlikely to accept his account on the supernatural events he claims to take place as he advances through Zampanò's manuscript. In other words, his narrative audience is likely to believe his claims that no existing copies of *The Navidson Record* can be found (xix) and that many of the textual sources Zampanò references are entirely fictitious (xx) but is unlikely to trust the truthfulness of his words when he describes the events that take place during his mental breakdowns (e.g. 149-51). Similarly, the Editors' narrative audience believes in their existence and trusts their view on the likelihood of events described by both Zampanò and Truant. However, any claims concerning the truth of the other two narratives' supernatural elements are probably not accepted by their narrative audience, either. As such, they are likely to trust the Editors on the accuracy of their translations and of their references yet may find the screenshot they claim to belong to *The Navidson Record* less believable. This screenshot, found in the third appendix, suggests that the documentary which Zampanò is unlikely to have seen due to his blindness does in fact exist (662). Due to this improbable premise, and due to the fact that Truant's account discredits Zampanò's claims, the Editors' narrative audience is unlikely to believe in the documentary's existence, let alone in the credibility of its alleged contents.

The second of the narrator's audiences is the ideal narrative audience (134-6). This audience differs from the narrative audience by believing that everything the narrator has to say is absolutely true (134). As Rabinowitz suggests, the narrative audience believes the narrator of the novel to be a real author who provides truthful information about the narrative world they both exist in (134). In other words, the narrative audience of *Cinderella* believes the narrator's description of the fairy godmother to be true since they are part of the same

narrative in which this is possible. Both the narrator and the narrative audience are aware of and accept the existence of such beings within the fictional reality they share. The narrative audience has thus no reason to doubt the honesty or the accuracy of the narrator's account on this matter. However, the narrative audience does not believe everything the narrator claims (134). The narrator's personal opinions or biased judgements, for example, will not be uncritically accepted even by the narrative audience (134). If the narrator of *Cinderella* were to analyse the fairy godmother's actions to be malicious despite what actually happens in the tale, for instance, the narrative audience would not be inclined to believe them. In other words, the narrative audience would believe that the narrator is telling the truth about the fairy godmother's existence but would disagree with the narrator's judgement concerning her intentions. The ideal narrative audience, in contrast, would take all of the narrator's claims as the absolute truth (134). Unlike the narrative audience, then, the ideal narrative audience agrees with everything the narrator has to say and accepts all of their evaluations as perfect (134). Rabinowitz explains that this is thus an "ideal" narrative audience especially from the narrator's point of view (134). This is the fictional audience the narrator hopes their narrative to have (134). In Rabinowitz' words, the narrator therefore wants an ideal narrative audience that "believes the narrator, accepts his judgments, sympathizes with his plight, [and] laughs at his jokes even when they are bad" (134).

In the case of *House of Leaves*, then, the ideal narrative audience of each of the three narrators believes their claims uncritically, irrespective of how likely it is for them to hold true. The ideal narrative audience of Zampanò accepts both his own existence and the existence of *The Navidson Record*. This ideal narrative audience also believes that the supernatural events depicted within the documentary are factual despite Zampanò's comments about their improbability. In other words, the ideal narrative audience knows that such events are unlikely to occur in the reality they share with Zampanò, but even then they choose to believe in their

truthfulness. Similarly, Truant's ideal narrative audience accepts his doubts concerning the likelihood of Zampanò's words and his own experiences, but nevertheless believes them to be true. Finally, the Editors' ideal narrative audience also understands how *The Navidson Record* is unlikely to exist and how its contents are unlikely to be true yet takes the Editors' screenshot as proof of both these things.

As both *S.* and *House of Leaves* have highly complex narratives with multiple narrators, Rabinowitz' framework can yield very detailed and varied analyses. Rabinowitz admits that such multi-layered literary texts may appear to contain even more audiences than the four subtypes described here (125-6). However, he also argues that this appearance is likely to be false, since any additional types of audiences tend to be mere variations of these four original types (125-6). Rabinowitz' concepts should therefore constitute sufficient analytical tools even for such elaborate experimental texts as *S.* and *House of Leaves*.

Another reason why Rabinowitz' approach is useful for my present study is the fact that it offers a helpful way to differentiate between the author's audiences' relationships with the text and narrator's audiences' relationships with it. In other words, Rabinowitz' concepts allow us to make a distinction between the level of text-reader interaction that happens in reality and the level of text-reader interaction that takes place within the fiction. As suggested in section 2.2.1, the fictional paratexts employed in the two novels aim to make their fictional content appear more real. The fictional publishing details, library classification labels, and social media accounts of *S.*, for instance, are placed amongst corresponding factual paratexts, and this co-occurrence aims to confuse the line between fact and fiction. The publishing details and library classification labels aim to make the novel seem like an actual library book, and the social media accounts of Eric and Jen aim to make them seem like actual people who truly have left their comments in the book's margins. However, this confusion is experienced only by the narrator's audiences, and not by the author's audiences.

Without making this distinction, we risk making overly broad generalizations about actual audiences' interactions with fictional texts. In *Multimodality, Cognition, and Experimental Literature*, for instance, Gibbons seems to make such a generalization by suggesting that in his introduction to *House of Leaves*, the narrator Johnny Truant addresses actual author Danielewski's audiences (2012: 63). Gibbons states that "Truant's introduction breaches the ontological divide between text and discourse-world, fiction and reality, to engage with each and every actual reader in their own time frame" (2012: 63). In other words, Gibbons suggests that when Truant warns his readers of the dangers they may face while reading the text, his warning is also directed at actual readers situated in our reality, the "discourse world" (2012: 63). In a certain sense this holds true, since Truant directs his words at his ideal narrative audience and his narrative audience, which are roles played by the actual audience. However, it would be questionable to think that Truant is directly addressing the actual audience from within the fictional novel, or that the actual audience would directly interact with narrator Truant's words. If this were the case, the actual audience could potentially confuse the line between fact and fiction and mistake the novel for a factual document. Instead, the actual audience is fully aware of the fact that they are reading a fictional text called *House of Leaves*, written by actual author Mark Z. Danielewski. They can, however, adopt the roles of the narrative and the ideal narrative audiences in order to take part in the fiction of the novel. Gibbons' analysis does eventually hint at this subtlety, adding that the novel "encourages the reader to develop an affinity with Truant, thus drawing the reader deeper into the world(s) of *House of Leaves* and motivating his/her emotional investment into the narrative" (2012: 64-5). Her analysis does, however, lack the terminology with which to accurately identify the exact ways in which actual readers can remain aware of novels' fictionality and simultaneously immerse themselves in that very fiction. What Rabinowitz' classification allows us to do, then, is to distinguish more clearly between our actual reality and the novels' fictional realities and

to define more precisely the different roles of text-reader interaction that are available to readers of fictional texts.

3.1.3 Problems

Although such hypothetical models of reading and of participant roles have their uses as part of my analysis, it must be added that they do also contain some flaws. As explained above, the theoretical models of reading suggested by Prince, Todorov, and Iser are highly general and ambiguous hypotheses. In reference to Booth's concepts of participant roles, Suleiman observes that the notions of implied author and implied reader are likewise problematic analytical devices. As she explains, they are both "interpretive constructs", and as such not objectively verifiable parts of the text. This makes the use of these notions questionable, since each critic's definition of the implied author and the implied reader of any text is always subjective. However, she also states that this subjectivity does not undermine the usefulness of Booth's concepts, but simply relativizes them. They are fictional constructs invented by each critic as they read and interpret texts, and they may thus only be valid in their specific contexts. They are not therefore necessarily valid in any universal or absolute sense but are merely useful tools one can use to make sense of texts when reading them. (Suleiman 1980: 11) By extension, the same can be said of Rabinowitz' audience roles and of my own chosen approach.

3.2 Readability

In her article "The Question of Readability in Avant-Garde Fiction", Suleiman addresses issues that are very similar to those considered here. She discusses ways in which readers of "unreadable" texts can make them feel less challenging and ways in which the texts themselves improve their own intelligibility. By "avant-garde fiction", Suleiman means modern fiction that subverts the rules and conventions of traditional realistic novels, and fiction that experiments with the shape and form of narrative (1981: 18). She therefore uses this term to

designate works that contain unusual depictions of our physical reality, works that refuse to conform to traditional narrative logic, and works that challenge the reader in their attempts to make sense of the texts' contents (1981: 18-20). In short, she employs the term "avant-garde" for works that are here called "experimental". As examples of such texts, Suleiman mentions *Tristram Shandy* and *Don Quixote*, as well as certain characteristic examples of the *nouveau* and *nouveau nouveau roman* (1981: 18, 24). She pays particular attention to the works of Alain Robbe-Grillet and Maurice Roche, which she shows to be highly challenging texts that are typically considered prime examples of unreadability (1981: 23). However, she also demonstrates that even these seemingly impenetrable texts can be found to contain certain elements of readability that allow them to be read and understood. As her definition of avant-garde fiction largely corresponds to the definition of experimental literature used in this thesis, her observations on readability can be directly adopted into the present discussion.

According to Suleiman, then, the term "readability" refers to the intelligibility of literary texts (1981, 18). As she explains, a readable text "is intelligible because it conforms to certain aesthetic and logical norms that a reader has internalized as a set of expectations; a readable text corresponds to a familiar order, a previously learned code" (1981: 18-9). This set of expectations, or code, comprises such features as linearity, coherence, non-contradiction, and the psychological depth of characters (1981: 24). The first of these expectations concerns the linearity of narrative. This refers to the assumption that the events of any given narrative take place in a logical order. In traditionally readable texts, then, events are expected to be introduced and described in the order of their occurrence (1981: 19). Experimental texts, in contrast, often break from this tradition by placing consecutive events apart from each other and by setting them into unusual combinations with unrelated events, or by repeating them in strange patterns (1981: 20). The second traditional expectation is the characteristic of coherence. Coherence concerns the assumption that narratives are intended to be complete,

fully realised constructs that contain as few ambiguities and loose ends as possible (1981: 19-20). Experimental texts reject this goal and tend to offer their readers fragmentation that has no clear sense of direction and little consistency (1981: 20). The third expectation is that of non-contradiction, which refers to the assumption that texts offer their readers information that does not undermine or contradict what has been stated before. In other words, a traditional narrative is expected to offer its readers information that holds true consistently throughout, whereas experimental literature can provide information that is both true and untrue at the same time (1981: 19-20). The final item on Suleiman's list of expectations is that of the psychological depth of characters. By this Suleiman means the expectation that the characters that exist within narratives have recognizable personality traits and relatively stable identities (1981: 19). Experimental texts do not necessarily conform to these expectations, and they therefore tend to contain characters with unstable features, uncertain motivations, and possible reliability issues (1981: 19-20).

Since both *House of Leaves* and *S.* exhibit most of the experimental features present in Suleiman's list, they seem to qualify as highly unreadable texts. Both novels are certainly non-linear in the traditional sense, as previously explained in section 2.2.2. They contain multiple narratives that are presented to the reader simultaneously, and not chronologically, as one might expect of a traditional narrative. Instead of being ordered sequentially, beginning from the narrative which is chronologically most distant and ending with the most recent addition, the novels offer their readers fragments of text that they can proceed through in more or less the order of their choosing. However, as mentioned in section 2.2.2, *House of Leaves* guides its reader's progress slightly more strictly than *S.* does. Since both *House of Leaves* and *S.* rely heavily on the reader's own active role in combining and deciphering their scattered contents, they also risk appearing incoherent. The novels opt out of any ultimate conclusions regarding their plots, for instance. As such, readers are given a great deal of freedom to decide on these

matters for themselves — and to share and compare their personal interpretations with other readers on the internet. Both novels also reject the expectation of non-contradiction by making their layered narratives undermine each other's claims. In *House of Leaves*, for instance, Zampanò first claims that *The Navidson Record* is an existing documentary (3-7), whereas Johnny Truant assures the opposite (xix). The Editors then contradict Truant by providing a screenshot that suggests that Zampanò was correct all along (662). Similarly, in *S.*, Straka presents his own tale as a work of fiction, which Caldeira's additions initially seem to support. Only Jen and Eric's comments reveal the hidden meanings behind Caldeira's words. As for the psychological depth of characters, both novels contain characters whose perspectives are not mediated through separate narrative voices. Instead, they exist within the novels as different typefaces, fonts of various colours, and specific textual conventions, such as forewords and footnotes. Alison Gibbons notes that in the case of *House of Leaves*, the typefaces indicate each character's contribution to the work and as such function as reported clauses of direct speech (2012: 48). In other words, they are not a separate narrator's depictions of the characters' thoughts and actions, but direct acts of communication. Each addition made by Johnny Truant, for instance, is written down by him and is meant to be understood as a representation of his direct involvement with his fictional public. As such, we, as actual readers, receive few unbiased indications of his psychological state or his mental processes, and are instead fully dependent on his own reports on the matter. Johnny Truant is therefore arguably not a fully realised, trustworthy, or stable representation of a fictional character, but a mere voice whose own word is the only source of information we receive. Although his commentary is expanded on by the Editors, whose interjections either support or contradict his claims, they themselves are not fully convincing, either. As such, their observations concerning the character and situation of Truant cannot be taken as objective proof of his identity or of the truth of his experiences.

However, despite manifesting all of the traditional features of unreadability outlined by Suleiman, *House of Leaves* and *S.* are not entirely unreadable. Although they are highly experimental, then, they are not unintelligible or impossible to read (1981: 20). Instead, they invite involvement and promote interaction between themselves and their readers. How can this contradiction be explained? How can these novels be both unreadable and readable at once? According to Suleiman, the answer lies in the distinction one can make between a text that is completely unreadable and a text that is merely unreadable in a traditional sense (1981: 26-7). She implies that texts of the first type are not at all common, and that most texts are therefore readable in at least some form (1981: 26-7). In reference to Alain Robbe-Grillet's fiction, for instance, Suleiman explains that although it does not conform to traditional rules of readability, it does follow certain rules of its own (1981: 24). Robbe-Grillet has succeeded in establishing his own set of conventions that carry through his combined body of work. These, initially subversive, elements have therefore been made to appear more familiar to his readers by means of repetition (1981: 24-5). The more frequently his readers come across these unusual features and the more they pay attention to them, the more familiar they begin to appear (1981: 24-5). They begin to make sense in the context of Robbe-Grillet's work, and they therefore begin to carry meaning within themselves. In other words, the unusual features Robbe-Grillet chooses to repeat in his works have undergone a transformation from elements of unreadability into characteristics that actually improve his novels' readability (1981: 25). Although Robbe-Grillet's work is certainly unreadable in a traditional sense, then, it has multiple other qualities that ensure it is readable in some other sense. Another similar example of unreadability transformed into readability is offered by Suleiman in her discussion on Maurice Roche's novel *Compact*. Suleiman explains that in contrast to Robbe-Grillet's method, which involves making unfamiliar literary conventions familiar by repeating them throughout his literary career, Roche's approach operates within one single literary work (1981: 29). Suleiman

describes how Roche's novel, which consists of stretches of text printed in different fonts and combined into barely intelligible collages, nevertheless manages to communicate relatively coherent and meaningful messages (1981: 29-33). Despite the novel's seeming impenetrability, then, it does manage to establish rules that function successfully within its own self. Although the reader is therefore initially confronted with a highly unreadable text, their own attempts to look for correspondences between heterogenous textual units result in the text becoming more readable than initially expected.

To some extent, *House of Leaves* and *S.* can be argued to conform to both of these alternative types of readability. Firstly, although the source of the novels' readability is not entirely equivalent to Suleiman's discussion on Robbe-Grillet, her observations can be used to explain some aspects of it. Unlike Robbe-Grillet's combined body of work, *House of Leaves* and *S.* are both stand-alone texts that do not explicitly refer to any previous bodies of text realised by their respective authors. *House of Leaves*, for example, is Danielewski's debut novel and as such does not expect its readers to be familiar with any literary conventions Danielewski might favour. In other words, the readability of *House of Leaves* has likely little to do with the author's literary preferences. In the case of *S.*, however, this explanation may have more relevance. Although *S.* is also an independent novel, both Doug Dorst and J. J. Abrams have had successful writing careers prior to co-creating this particular text. This suggests that readers who are familiar with their styles of writing and storytelling may be able to discern elements that are typical to them. This, in turn, can potentially create a certain sense of familiarity that can guide readers through the novel. In the case of *S.*, then, the existence of a prior body of work realised by its two authors may constitute a form of readability. Next, in reference to Suleiman's discussion on Roche, both *House of Leaves* and *S.* contain structures that consist of separate textual units combined into coherent messages. In *House of Leaves*, for instance, the novel's narrators' additions printed in different typefaces are distinctive enough

to be connected into separate yet intertwined messages that together form the three narrative threads of the novel. In *S.*, too, the three narratives of Straka, Caldeira, and Jen and Eric contain similarities that are consistent enough for the reader to identify their significance as relatively independent narrative units. The first set of Jen and Eric's notes, for instance, can clearly be identified throughout the novel as a separately meaningful conversation that works both separately from and in combination with the two characters' other discussions and with the other narrators' additions.

Suleiman also suggests that in addition to specific authors' literary habits and individual experimental texts' internal similarities, the entire genre of experimental literature shares some features that aid readers in their attempts to make sense of their narratives. She remarks that as soon as the reader of an experimental text realises that they are reading a text of an experimental nature, they begin to make sense of it according to their prior experiences and their existing knowledge of the genre (1981: 26). If the reader recognises the text as a piece of experimental literature, then, and if they are aware of the genre's typically subversive nature, they will immediately expect it to exhibit non-traditional features (1981: 26). Due to this expectation, the reader will attempt to find some form of order that improves the text's readability, even though this order is likely to differ greatly from the conventions of traditional literature (1981: 26).

Suleiman's observations concerning the different forms of readability that experimental texts can exhibit provide a useful backdrop for the main argument of this thesis. They suggest that *House of Leaves* and *S.* can be both highly experimental and highly readable novels at once, and by acknowledging this possibility they help guide our attention to the question of how this combination of traits can be explained. Furthermore, Suleiman's analysis of the four characteristic features of traditionally readable texts prompts us to search for alternative sources of readability appropriate for these particular texts. Suleiman's own suggestions for

such alternative sources act as a valuable starting point, yet they are far from exhaustive. In other words, the authors' preferred literary styles, the inner logic underlying each experimental text's challenging aspects, and the overall difficulty expected of experimental texts are likely to answer for certain parts of non-traditional readability in general. However, it is also possible to identify additional sources of readability that are specific for *House of Leaves* and *S.* and that can at times even be tied in with their most prominent experimental characteristics.

4 Sources of Readability in *House of Leaves* and *S.*

In this chapter, I combine the observations that have been made so far into an analysis that attempts to answer the question of what makes *House of Leaves* and *S.* as readable as they are. The first source of readability discussed here has to do directly with the plot. I argue that both novels make use of certain specific genre conventions in order to unify their narrative strands into identifiable and comprehensible stories. In other words, I suggest that the familiar elements in the novels' plots guide their readers through the more challenging aspects of their experimental contents. The next source of readability considered here is immersion. I suggest that both novels include multiple features that aim to draw the reader into the fiction and directly involve them with the story. This characteristic improves the novels' readability as it makes the act of reading enjoyable and thus motivates the reader to try to understand and interpret what they read. The final source of readability I discuss in this chapter is the two narratives' self-consciousness. In addition to their immersive features, the two novels also contain multiple elements that highlight their artificial and fictional nature. These elements improve readability by keeping the reader aware of the strategies that the texts employ in order to engage them in the act of reading. By means of these strategies, the texts become puzzles that the reader can attempt to solve. In this way, the reader is made aware of the stories' contents on a meta-level, and they are given the opportunity to enjoy the texts as games with rules that can be learned and made use of.

4.1 Source of Readability 1: Narrative Centre

The first characteristic that explains the two novels' readability is their adherence to recognizable literary genres. Their intelligibility and accessibility are therefore partly due to the familiar aspects that are visible to the reader from underneath the various experimental features that naturally draw attention to themselves. These familiar traces are what inform the reader of each novels' subject matter, and they therefore let the reader know what to expect

once they read further on. In this way, they prevent the reader from getting distracted by the reading difficulties their visual and narrative experiments can potentially cause, and they invite the reader to enjoy the stories as the engaging tales they are.

In his book *How Novels Work*, John Mullan explains that the term “literary genre” refers to both a type of writing and a habit of reading (105). He states that genres are collections of conventions that help categorize texts into distinct groups depending on the presence or absence of particular identifiable features (105). Within the genre of the novel, Mullan cites such sub-genres as science fiction, romance, detective fiction, and horror fiction (106). Each of these specific types of novelistic genres contains typical features that writers employ when composing their texts and that readers use as they consider what to expect of the texts they are reading (105).

As stated, then, both *House of Leaves* and *S.* can be clearly identified as examples of specific literary genres. *House of Leaves*, for one, exhibits a wide range of characteristics typical of horror fiction. It contains the core tale of a haunted house, a disturbing documentary that is likely to not exist, a narrator who dies mysteriously, and another who loses himself as he delves too deep into the unknown. Venla Virhiä has studied the novel specifically from this angle, and her analysis discusses the horror tropes used in the novel in further detail. She concentrates first on the haunted house formula and explains how Danielewski deliberately replicates it in almost every respect (21). She describes how the house of *House of Leaves* is, first of all, a large, aged building with a sinister and unnerving history. Its exact age remains unclear and its previous owners have all abandoned it after having been subjected to various disturbing incidents. She then explains how the new owners, Will Navidson and his family, also echo the horror trope by having a middleclass origin and by being initially unaware of the unnatural character of their new home. Another feature of the haunted house trope is the gradual increase in the sense of danger the house provokes. The house begins to manifest its strangeness

by growing only slightly at first, causing Navidson and his family to doubt whether this anomaly exists in actual fact at all. Eventually, the house becomes more threatening, and only when escape is no longer a valid option does it finally reveal its full capabilities. (Virhiä 21-3)

Another horror trope Virhiä has identified in *House of Leaves* is that of the found manuscript (29). She explains how both Johnny and the Editors' narrative levels make use of this tradition by framing supposedly pre-existing unfinished manuscripts (29-30). Johnny's account begins with an introduction where he describes how he came to discover Zampanò's text and how he then decided to compile it into its finished form. He also informs the reader of those aspects of Zampanò's text that he himself finds hard to believe. As Virhiä observes, Johnny's account mirrors the typical characteristics of this device by reporting the origins of the found text and by doubting its truthfulness (29). Similarly, the Editors also begin with a foreword where they reveal how they completed Truant's work. Later on, they provide evidence that supports and contradicts both Zampanò and Truant's claims, and by doing so they reinforce the trope of the found manuscript even further.

Other characteristics typical of the horror genre that Virhiä has identified in *House of Leaves* include the themes of nightmares (38-9), madness (39-45), uncertainty (42-3), and darkness and emptiness (48-57). These characteristics are all easily recognizable within the novel, and due to their familiarity as part of a well-established genre of fiction, they work to dilute the estranging effect caused by the novel's experimental features. They provide support for the reader when they have little else to depend on and they encourage the reader to continue reading through the challenging and confusing features they encounter. In a sense, they act as a device that connects the various experimental characteristics into a full story with a plot and a purpose. As such, the reader is given some indication of what to expect of the novel and is thus guided through it by promising an eventual answer to the questions it first provokes.

Whether or not this promise is then kept is another matter, since the haunted house, the

found manuscripts, the nightmares, and the rest of the unnerving features are never fully explained away or given a satisfying conclusion. As Elana Gomel confirms, *House of Leaves* thus exploits certain conventional aspects of horror literature while it simultaneously subverts these conventions in order to create new meanings (402-3). The novel's horrors are not contained solely within its narrative world, since they are also present in the novel's language and in its form (402-3). Caroline Hagood agrees with Gomel by stating that *House of Leaves* is "concerned with the exploration of layers of narrative without the happy ending or revelation that will explain everything that previously appeared inexplicable. Truth is not the point, as the text is about the process of linguistic portrayal and its effect on the portrayer and on the portrayed" (89). The reader of *House of Leaves* is therefore not faced with a fully traditional horror tale, but with a highly postmodern text that employs conventions of horror without being fully defined by them. It must be noted, then, that although my analysis here focuses primarily on the conventional aspects of the horror genre present in *House of Leaves*, the novel does also subvert these tropes in ways that are not discussed here.

In what ways, then, are the tropes that the novel does follow easy to notice and, furthermore, how does this ease help the reader in their reading task? If we begin from the trope of the haunted house, we can observe that this is provided mostly by the pseudo-academic study of Zampanò. As explained in section 2.1.1, this scholarly text composed of a body text and related footnotes forms the narrative core of the novel's Chinese-box structure. As such, this narrative level is the centre onto which the other two narrative strands are attached. What this means from the perspective of the reader is that this is the narrative they leave whenever they follow either of the other two narrative strands, and that this is the narrative they then return to once they have completed each path that forked off. The fact that this narrative also contains the familiar tale of a haunted house means that the reader is likely able to follow what happens in it even though it is frequently interrupted. As they recognize the narrative as a tale of a

haunted house, they can combine what they read into a collection of elements they know to be typical of the trope and they can then also begin to anticipate certain aspects of what is to come. The narrative of the haunted house thus becomes a memorable centre to which it is easy to return after having explored the more unfamiliar narrative strands surrounding it. Even if the reader were unable to recognize the horror trope, the fact that Zampanò's account holds the position of the body text to which everything else is added means that the reader is nevertheless likely to remember what they are returning to.

An example of how this works can be observed in a section that begins from page 63. This section of the body text describes Navidson's first attempt to explore the haunted labyrinth that springs up beneath his family's home. In other words, this section depicts a scene which is highly typical of haunted house narratives: one in which the main character can no longer resist the urge to explore the unnatural aspects of the house. What this section does, then, is reproduce a familiar premise that is likely to hold specific meanings for readers who are familiar with the trope of the haunted house. For these readers, the novel thus promises a potential explanation for the unnatural aspects of the house, while also suggesting that there are more horrors to come. By thus provoking anticipation, the body text gives this type of reader a reason to remember its contents even though it is frequently interrupted by lengthy chains of footnotes. For readers who are unaware of this particular trope, the motivation to remember the contents of the body text has likely less to do with such genre-specific conventions than with its central position and with its overall appeal as an engaging storyline.

The first page of this section shows the events that lead to Navidson's decision to enter one of the labyrinth's strange corridors, and it therefore sets up the reader's anticipation for what is to come. This body text description is broken by a short footnote added by Truant (63), but due to the brevity of this footnote and due to the fact that it is situated at the very beginning of the section, the return from the footnote back to the body text is likely to be an easy one.

Here, the reader is therefore likely to remember what they are returning to simply because the footnote that interrupts the body text is not long enough to cause a distraction. The next page of the body text details the contents of the corridor Navidson enters, and here the body text is interrupted by a lengthy footnote containing a list of names added by Zampanò (64-7). This footnote is then followed by another footnote added by Truant (67). Here, the length of the two footnotes is likely to divert the reader's attention to a more considerable degree than in the previous example. However, the fact that the body text breaks off at a moment where Navidson first realises the true scale of the labyrinth is likely to hold the reader's attention despite the distraction caused by the lengthy footnote. The body text's description breaks off at a moment where Navidson enters a space with no visible walls or ceiling, and it does so with the words "Only now do we begin to see how big Navidson's house really is" (64). This sentence offers new information on the labyrinth's size, but also withholds any further description. This prompts the reader to expect there to be more to reveal and invites them to consider what this additional information could be. After having followed the two footnotes, then, the reader is likely to have retained the wish to find out more about the labyrinth. The body text continues with a scene where Navidson proceeds to get lost in the labyrinth and discovers that it is occupied by a monstrous creature. He eventually manages to escape the labyrinth, and here the body text is once again interrupted by several footnotes (69). This time, however, the first footnote stretches across three entire pages, and the second footnote encourages the reader to explore two sections of the second appendix before returning to the rest of the body text (69-72). If the reader chooses to follow the second footnote's directions, they will spend a considerable amount of time reading material at the back of the book before returning to where they left off. The body text that follows describes Navidson's seemingly reassuring return to safety and the deceptively positive resolution to the problems posed by the house (72-3). What keeps the reader interested in this development is the fact that it represents merely the first part

of the traditional haunted house narrative. The reader knows that, despite the seemingly happy end of the scene, the house will likely become even more menacing over time, and that by continuing to pay attention to the body text, the reader will eventually discover more about what these menacing features are.

The second convention of horror that is clearly visible in *House of Leaves* is that of the found manuscript. The reason why this convention is easily noticeable and recognizable is the fact that the reader is confronted with it from the very beginning. On its title page, for instance, the novel is already revealed to be the work of more than one fictional author. Instead of being called simply *House of Leaves*, the novel's full title is *House of Leaves by Zampanò with Introduction and Notes by Johnny Truant*. In this way, the reader is already made to expect elements added by at least two characters. The following copyright page then reveals the involvement of the Editors, and thus the reader is made aware of all three narrative voices even before the novel has properly begun.

If the reader then notices that the novel replicates the trope of the found manuscript and if they also recognize the trope as typical of the horror genre, they can make use of a prior model of reading to make sense of the text's more confusing aspects. They can advance from one section of the text to another without getting lost or confused because they know from the beginning that what they are reading is a tale told from three different perspectives. In other words, then, by recognizing the genre the reader gains some perspective on how to read this text: they know to remain patient when the body text is interrupted and when narrators begin to describe tangential anecdotes. They know that such framing narratives are to be understood as part of the central one and that tales about finding the manuscript are as important to the meaning of the novel as is the found manuscript itself.

The other characteristics of the novel that Virhiä has identified as conventions of horror fiction, including themes of nightmares, madness, uncertainty, darkness, and emptiness, are

also clearly identifiable. Each frequently makes an appearance in multiple narrators' texts, and as such they seem to filter through each narrative level and diffuse throughout the entire novel. In this way they, too, are features that connect the novel's separate narrative levels together, facilitating the reader's attempts to make sense of the text as a whole.

The theme of nightmares, for instance, is explicitly present in at least the narratives of both Zampanò and Truant. It is first brought up at the very beginning of the novel, when Truant opens his introduction with the admission "I still get nightmares. In fact I get them so often I should be used to them by now" (xi). The theme of nightmares is then repeatedly brought up in his footnotes, such as when he asks "Did I scream every night? What did I say? And why in the hell couldn't I remember any of it in the morning?" (149-150). Zampanò's text also discusses the theme in some detail. It describes, in particular, the effects that the house has on Navidson and analyses some of the dreams he experiences after spending time in the labyrinth (398-407). Zampanò suggests that the dreams are directly caused by the house (396-7), after which he goes on to suggest that mere knowledge of the haunted labyrinth has been recorded to have had similar effects on other people, too (407). In this way, Zampanò offers a potential explanation for Truant's dreams. This makes the theme of nightmares a direct link between the two narrative levels. This link, in turn, offers support to the reader and helps them connect what they read into a single narrative, instead of them appearing as multiple independent narratives with no common thread to join them.

Another theme typical of the horror genre, uncertainty, is also present in several of the novel's narrative levels. In fact, it is present in all three of them, including Zampanò, Truant, and the Editors' levels. If we begin from Zampanò's level, uncertainty can be observed in such instances as where he suggests that the film's origin and authenticity are not absolutely clear or provable. He states, for instance, that "*The Navidson Record* now stands as part of this country's cultural experience and yet in spite of the fact that hundreds of thousands of people

have seen it, the film continues to remain an enigma” (7). Truant’s account reflects this sentiment, although his experience of uncertainty has less to do with the film’s unclear origin than with its doubtful existence. However, even though he denies that the documentary exists, he still allows for the possibility that Zampanò’s narrative itself can cause severe psychological damage to anyone who comes into contact with it. As he explains, “the irony is it makes no difference that the documentary at the heart of this book is fiction. Zampanò knew from the get go that what’s real or isn’t real doesn’t matter here. The consequences are the same” (xx). As such, he gives the reader a chance to doubt Zampanò’s claims, yet nevertheless validates the reader’s potential feelings of fear and confusion in the face of his text. As for the Editors, they frequently comment on the uncertain nature of Zampanò’s and Truant’s combined work. At several points along the novel, they suggest that the origins of certain textual passages, for instance, are uncertain. In the labyrinth section, for example, they comment that “Mr. Truant refused to reveal whether the following bizarre textual layout is Zampanò’s or his own” (134). As such, they, too, add to the reader’s confusion and strengthen the sense of not knowing what to believe and who to trust. By appearing in each of these narrative levels at frequent intervals, the theme of uncertainty works to join them together and gives the reader a sense that they are reading a text with a more or less clear narrative centre.

In a similar way, *S.* can also be observed to follow certain genre conventions that facilitate the reader’s engagement with its experimental features. The novel’s plot centres on the body text added by V. M. Straka, which describes a nameless hero’s attempts to recover his lost identity. Along the way, he meets various other characters who invite him to join their group. The nameless protagonist discovers that this group is involved in a conflict with a mysterious and powerful adversary. The members of the group work undercover in an attempt to defeat their enemy, and to do so they carry out clandestine operations that aim to diminish their opponents influence. This narrative is initially treated as entirely fictional within the

narrative world of *S*. However, the additions made by F. X. Caldeira reveal that Straka has based his story on real events, and furthermore, that both he and Caldeira appear in the novel as characters. This indicates that Straka and Caldeira were actually members of such a resistance group that fought against an existing shadowy organization. Caldeira's comments are themselves also written in code, and thus the reader has no direct access to their hidden meaning. Instead, their contents are revealed by Jen and Eric as they discuss the ways in which the footnotes have been encrypted. It is therefore through Jen and Eric that the reader learns about the novel's overall plot and realises how these different narrative levels work together to form a single narrative.

This overarching narrative can be seen to follow certain conventions that are typical of the genre of crime fiction. In his work *Crime Fiction: From Poe to the Present*, Martin Priestman explains that the genre of crime fiction can be divided into separate sub-genres. Crime fiction, as its name suggests, refers to narratives that centre around a crime and the process of solving it (1). The sub-genres of this line of fiction include such examples as the detective whodunnit, the thriller, the detective thriller, and serial killer fiction (1-2). Out of these sub-genres the closest match to *S*. would seem to be that of the thriller, and in particular, that of the hero-thriller. As Priestman explains, thrillers provide the reader with a narrative that recapitulates a past crime and describes the process of solving it, while also retaining a sense of threat throughout (43). In other words, the characters of a thriller are not only concerned with a past crime, but they are also in danger at the time of solving that crime (43). In a hero-thriller, the protagonists are depicted as being on the side of the good, while the forces that work against them are portrayed as their sinister opposite (43).

These features can be clearly identified as elements of the novel *S*., as it includes a mysterious past crime, efforts to solve that crime in the narrative present, and also a juxtaposition between forces of good and evil. These characteristics spread across the narrative

levels of the novel, and thus join the levels together in the reader's mind into a coherent narrative with familiar features to act as guides. The novel's body text describes the events of the past crime, as it depicts the nameless protagonist's journey to become a member of a resistance group fighting against a powerful evil organization. Straka's tale details the downfall of this resistance group, as its members are eliminated by their adversary. Caldeira's notes then reveal that Straka's tale is not fictional but an actual historical document that details the fate of an actual group of resistance fighters which both Straka and Caldeira were part of. This discovery is made by Jen and Eric, who work together to decode the meanings behind both Straka and Caldeira's encrypted texts. While working on their findings, the two realise that their efforts have been noted by the evil organization that attacked Straka and Caldeira's group and they then become targeted by this organization themselves. This adds a sense of urgency and danger to Jen and Eric's narrative and thus makes their story more than merely a tale of uncovering a past crime. In this way, then, the novel replicates the basic premise of a hero-thriller. The reader is presented with a crime whose details are gradually revealed as the novel advances, and they are also offered a struggle between the forces of good and evil.

4.2 Source of Readability 2: Immersion

In addition to the two novels' plots and their familiar genre conventions, there are also other features that add to their readability. The second feature that can be said to be responsible for the two novels' readability, then, is their immersive nature. There are multiple ways in which the novels draw the reader into their fiction and make the reader take part in their narratives. It is my argument, however, that the elements that thus add to the novels' immersive qualities are directly connected with their seemingly challenging experimental characteristics. In other words, I suggest that the novels are engaging precisely because of their experimental aspects and not despite them. In what follows, then, I attempt to describe the ways in which the three

main experimental characteristics introduced in section 2.2 affect and improve the novels' immersive power.

Marie-Laure Ryan defines immersion as an experience in which the reader of a text sees beyond the text's artificial, language-based form and instead agrees to imagine the kind of reality it describes (90-1). What Ryan means, then, is that immersion causes the reader to view the text as more than mere words and sentences on a page. It makes the reader pay attention to the text's contents, and draws them into the stories, places, and states of affairs they describe. She explains that immersion can take place when reading either fictional or factual texts (92), but maintains that, whatever the type of text, it must contain a specific kind of imaginary reality for its reader to be able to immerse in it (90). She calls such imaginary realities "textual worlds" (90), and states that they are typically composed of such objects, characters, and settings that can be imagined by the reading subject on the basis of the textual cues given (91). In order for a text to be immersive, then, it must contain a kind of hypothetical reality that can be imagined.

Ryan then goes on to discuss the cognitive processes that take place in the mind of the reader as they experience immersion while reading. Drawing on the observations of psychologist Richard Gerrig, she describes how the reader is transported from our actual world into the immersive narrative world, and how they then return changed by the experience (93-4). She describes how, according to Gerrig, texts first give directions to their readers on how to enter their imaginary worlds and then guide them on what kinds of identities to adopt while doing so (93). In other words, when readers first interact with potentially immersive texts, they are confronted with the implied directions for achieving immersion that have been encoded into the text by the author. The reader is presented with information on the type of narrative world the text contains as well as rules on how to interact with the text if they wish to achieve immersion. The reader can then choose to follow these directions fully, to follow them partially,

or to ignore them completely. Accordingly, Ryan explains how Gerrig's model underlines the importance of the reader's own active attempts to follow the directions and guidelines given to them by the text (93-4). As she explains, texts contain information on what the reader is getting immersed in and guidelines for the ways in which they should be doing so, but it is the reader's own participation that ultimately prompts this immersion and makes it happen (93-4). Next, Ryan interprets Gerrig's ideas by stating that if the reader chooses to follow the text's directions and becomes immersed in the text, they feel the effects of this immersion by momentarily losing sight of the actual world and by becoming transported into the narrative world instead (94). An immersed reader becomes less focused on the realities of our world than with the alternative realities provided by the immersive text (94). However, Ryan also implies that this cognitive transportation does not mean that the immersed reader is not aware of the fact that they are reading a text, and, furthermore, states that this remaining awareness of actual reality does not mean that the reader cannot pretend to believe what they know to be unreal (94). In other words, an immersed reader is both unaware and aware of the actual world simultaneously, with their consciousness fluctuating between the two realities depending on the way they interact with the text. Finally, Ryan implies that because the reader is aware of the actual world even when they are immersed in a text, their return to the real world is a simple one (94). However, because their consciousness has been occupied by another reality, they return slightly changed (94).

On the basis of these theoretical observations, we can now begin to consider the ways in which the novels' experimental features improve their immersive power. The first experimental characteristic discussed in chapter 2.2 is that of fragmentation. This characteristic is visible in the two novels' structure, as the texts are divided into body texts and their surrounding paratexts. These paratexts are of two types, since some of them are situated within the novels and some outside of them. These peritexts and epitexts are then of further two types,

as some of them are factual and some fictional. These two types of peritexts and epitexts are formally indistinguishable, and they are also situated amongst each other in a way that makes it even more challenging to tell them apart. By thus offering their readers fragmented texts that are partly factual and partly fictional, the novels aim to blur the line between reality and fiction, and it is this intention that improves the novels' immersive power.

It can be argued that the outwardly similar fictional and factual peritexts and epitexts first support immersion by making the two novels' narrative worlds easy to imagine. The way they achieve this is primarily by relating the novels' textual worlds to our actual world. More specifically, they inform the reader that the novels' narrative worlds share facts with our reality. In *House of Leaves*, for instance, the footnotes that contain references to actual authors and their actual works, such as Penelope Reed Doob and her work *The Idea of the Labyrinth: from Classical Antiquity through the Middle Ages* (114), suggest that these aspects of the real world exist in the fictional world of the novel as well. What this suggests to the reader is that the novels' narrative worlds are not very different from our own. In this way, then, the novels' partially factual fragmented structures inform the reader of what kinds of narrative worlds they are dealing with and, furthermore, they reveal how little work it takes to enter these narrative worlds. By containing both factual and fictional information that is spread across different media platforms, the novels indicate that what they expect their readers to know and believe about their narrative worlds is whatever they already know and believe about their own world. In other words, they show their reader that the worlds they contain are not entirely new worlds, but only modified versions of our own. What they ask their readers to do in order to achieve immersion, then, is first make use of their existing knowledge of our world and then simply add certain things to it. In other words, the novels' fragmented structures create a situation in which the reader does not have to imagine a completely different fictional reality in order to engage with it, but they are given a shortcut in which they can take what they already know

and then simply alter their existing knowledge in the ways prompted by the texts. In this way, the barrier for immersion is lowered to such an extent that making the transition from our world to the novels' fictional worlds is a simple and swift operation.

In order to consider this idea in more detail, we can observe examples of ways in which the two novels aim to confuse the line between factual and fictional peritexts, as well as between factual and fictional epitexts. These examples can then be used to clarify the types of narrative worlds involved and then to demonstrate how their characteristics simplify the act of immersion. If we begin by examining the peritexts of *House of Leaves* and *S.*, we can focus on the ways in which their physical appearance and their visual presentation relate them to our world and make them seem as if their contents could be part of actual reality. In the case of *S.*, for instance, the novel is first enclosed within a slip-cover, which is an actual peritext, and then within hard covers that constitute a fictional peritext. Both peritexts contain typical and convincingly presented information, such as a title, names of authors, and publishing details. However, since only the slip-cover is an actual peritext, it is the only one containing factual information. The novel's hard covers, in contrast, bear the title of the fictional novel *Ship of Theseus*, the name of the fictional author V. M. Straka, and the name of a fictional publishing company called Winged Shoes Press. However, the fact that these fictional details are presented in such a convincing manner means that there is no clear indication of their fictional nature. They are presented in such a way that they could be real in our world, although they are not. They are designed and presented according to the existing conventions of literary publishing, suggesting that they form a part of a fictional world that shares these conventions. What they ask the novel's reader to do in order to achieve immersion, then, is imagine a fictional reality in which this fictional novel could be real. In other words, the reader is given an indication that the narrative world of *S.* is similar enough to our own in that novels adhere to similar publishing conventions. However, the reader is simultaneously informed that the narrative world is just

different enough to allow for the existence of this particular novel. What the reader is invited to do, then, is use their knowledge of our world to imagine a fictional version of it, and then modify their knowledge of the truth just enough to allow for the existence of the novel.

A similar operation is performed by *House of Leaves* by means of the mixture of fact and fiction realised on the novel's copyright page. As the page contains both factual legal information, such as trademark notices, and fictional information such as the claims made by the novel's fictional Editors, it toys with the novel's uncertain borders between fact and fiction. By having some of its fictional characters make a factual-looking claim in the midst of truly factual information, the novel indicates to its reader that its narrative world is one in which such claims are made as routinely as in our world and that some aspects of the novel's fiction are considered fictional even by some of its characters. This gives the reader a sense that the novel's world is similar to ours in enough ways to replicate a certain version of it, leaving the reader with the task of only accepting some of its more unnatural aspects into their already existing concept of reality. Naturally, these examples provide only a very limited description of how this strategy works, but as the novels contain a great deal of similar examples of how our reality is mixed with some more fantastic features, the effect is multiplied into one strong enough to make the reader accept and enter the two narrative worlds.

A similar analysis can be made of the novels' epitexts, as for example in the case of the Twitter accounts linked to the fictional characters of *S.*, and in reference to the musical album shown to contain music that exists both inside and outside of *House of Leaves*. What Jen and Eric's Twitter accounts do, for one, is show that the narrative world of *S.* is similar enough to ours for them to share this particular social media platform. Because the Twitter accounts are epitexts, and thus situated apart from the novel itself, the reader is not necessarily aware of their existence. In this way, it can be argued that their role in creating and strengthening immersion is not quite as obvious or as vital as in the case of the novel's peritexts. However, it

is precisely because they are separate from the physical novel and thus less readily available for the reader to experience that they can be said to create a very strong sense of immersion for those who engage with them. They are elements of the novel's fiction that are directly present in our real world, and, furthermore, they seem to exist in our world independently from the novel. If the reader discovers these social media accounts, then, the differences between the novel's fictional world and the actual world are evened out, and the reader has to adjust their perception of reality very little in order to pretend that the novel's contents are true. The social media accounts therefore not only show the reader that the novel's narrative world is highly similar to ours, but it also indicates that aspects of the narrative world are actually true in our reality. The existence of the social media accounts therefore mean that the reader can first imagine the novel's narrative world as similar to ours, but then they are also given the chance to avoid making much effort to accept this world. They do not need to adjust their knowledge of reality in order to try and pretend to believe in the existence of some of its narrators. The narrators seem to exist in the actual world itself, and this makes it very simple for the reader to immerse themselves into this narrative world that so insistently conceals its fictional nature. The same effect can be said to be created by the musical album *Haunted* by singer-songwriter Poe that features a song that is present in both the novel *House of Leaves* and also in our actual reality. As in the previous example of Jen and Eric's Twitter accounts, the musical album works to break down the barrier between fiction and fact, making the reader's attempts to achieve immersion a very simple and effortless process.

The next experimental characteristic that can be said to be involved in creating immersion is that of network structure. As explained above in section 2.2.2, network structure refers to the way in which the novels join their narrative strands into two overarching narratives. The two novels are hypertexts, since their readers are presented with fragmented material that they are then expected to navigate through according to the indications given and according to

their own abilities and interests. As previously explained, *House of Leaves* guides the reader through its contents slightly more closely than *S.* does, since the links between its elements are more explicit than those in *S.* The reader of *S.* is therefore given slightly more freedom in the manner in which they navigate the text, but they are nevertheless encouraged to experience the text as a whole. In addition to linking the fragmented elements within the novels into complete narrative units, the links also join the various epitexts to the peritextual content contained within the novels themselves. The way these network structures improve the novels' immersive qualities is by allowing the various narrative voices and fictional and factual paratexts to interact with each other in a way that makes it easy for the reader to envision and enter the narrative worlds the novels contain. They offer the reader a view of various different sides of the two narrative worlds and they therefore support the reader in their attempts to understand and make sense of these worlds.

In order to describe how this process works, I will here focus on the interaction between the two novels' respective narrative layers. Since the layers, such as Zampanò, Truant, and the Editors' narratives in *House of Leaves*, are split up into short sections that are inserted amongst each other, their contents are given an opportunity to react. Each narrative voice is followed by another and each claim can be contradicted by the observations made by the other narrative layers. If we consider this process one narrative layer at a time and advance upwards from the body texts to the layers that are added onto them, we can analyse the way in which the novels' fictional worlds are created and the ways in which they are elaborated on. The fact that the fragmented narrative voices are primarily concerned with establishing what can be considered real within the narrative worlds is an aspect that is particularly important for the question of immersion. As the narrative fragments debate over what is and what is not possible within the narrative worlds, they echo the reader's attempts to relate to these worlds. Each fragment that dismisses the possibility of the more unnatural aspects of the novels, or that offers a possible

real-world interpretation for a situation that seems undeniably fictional, draws the narrative world closer to our own and once again reduces the work the reader must do in order to imagine the world and to enter it. Another way to understand this process is offered by N. Katherine Hayles and Nick Monfort as they explain that narratives told from multiple perspectives allow the reader to establish the common elements between multiple representations of one narrative world (453). In this way, narratives such as *House of Leaves* and *S.* use their multi-layered and networked narrative structures to create robust fictional worlds that can be successfully imagined and entered.

If we begin from the novels' body texts, then, we can observe that they first describe one version of their respective fictional worlds which the various surrounding paratexts then build upon. In *House of Leaves*, for instance, Zampanò's body text presents the reader with a world which is in many ways similar to ours. It contains events that are set in recognizable real-world settings, such as the state of Virginia, and characters that correspond to actual human beings. However, it also contains events and settings that are much less realistic, such as the haunted house, disappearing and reappearing corridors, and a monstrous creature crawling around a labyrinth. If the novel only contained this body text, these unrealistic settings and events would immediately negate the effect of realism created by the real-world setting and believable characters. There would be no other voices to contradict Zampanò's tale and to reinstate the illusion of realism once it was broken. As it happens, however, *House of Leaves* does have these additional voices, which take the form of the novel's paratexts. What Truant's additions do to Zampanò's body text, then, is they offer a sceptical counterpoint that makes the novel once again appear more realistic than what Zampanò's tale would suggest. They appear to draw the novel back to our reality by pointing out the unrealistic aspects of the previous narrative level and in this way mirroring the reader's own understanding of what is possible in reality. When Truant observes that the documentary described by Zampanò does not exist, for

instance, the novel's narrative world is once again made more similar to ours. When Truant then eventually begins to believe in the horrors of Zampanò's tale, it is the Editors who keep the novel near our actual reality. This illusion is then eventually shattered even by the Editors, but for a moment they keep the novel close to our reality. What these fragmented narrative levels do, then, is regularly and repeatedly strengthen the illusion of realism by addressing the reader's inevitable scepticism in the face of the novel's more fantastic events. They prevent the reader from having to unquestioningly accept anything too extraordinary, and instead reduce the work the reader must do in order to immerse themselves in the novel's narrative world.

Similarly, in *S.*, Straka's body text first introduces a narrative world that the comments of Caldeira, Jen, and Eric then modify and adapt into something more realistic and believable. As explained above in section 2.1.2, Straka's tale is initially expected to be fictional even within the narrative world of *S.* However, this illusion is then broken by the footnotes added by translator and editor F. X. Caldeira. Caldeira's cryptic remarks reveal that Straka's words are intended to be only partly fictional and that Straka's narrative level therefore also contains information that is factual within the novel's narrative world. What this reveals to the reader is that the world they are attempting to become immersed in is not the shadowy and obscure one of the body text's nameless hero, but a world more similar to ours, occupied by Straka and Caldeira. Caldeira's comments thus add another narrative layer to the tale and also show that this one is closer to our reality than the one present in Straka's tale. Jen and Eric's comments then add an even closer narrative level to the novel, explaining and clarifying both Straka and Caldeira's intentions. In addition, their narrative level also contains frequent references to more mundane everyday existence, thus modifying the novel's narrative world into an even more familiar world for the reader to imagine. Their comments on university life and on the typical problems of early adulthood draw the novel's world even closer to our reality than do Caldeira's revelations about the spying operations undertaken by herself, Straka, and their

circle of friends on the literary scene. In this way, similarly to *House of Leaves*, the novel's layered narrative strands offer repeated modifications to the previous versions of the novel's narrative world and make it seem progressively more similar to ours. This is how the novel improves the reader's understanding of its narrative world and makes immersion an easy and effortless task to realise.

The final experimental characteristic considered here from the perspective of immersion is that of multimodality. As explained in section 2.2.3, a multimodal text is one which employs multiple modes of communication simultaneously in order to express meaning. These modes of communication can include verbal or visual material, or they can rely on the physical actions of the reader. As explained above, the multimodal nature of *House of Leaves* is made evident by such features as its visual use of typography and its physically engaging design. Its narrative is told not only through text, but also through the appearance of that text and through the reader's interaction with it. Similarly, in *S.*, elements of the narrative are expressed both verbally and by other means. Some of the novel's visual details, for instance, offer support to information expressed in words. The progression of Jen and Eric's relationship, for example, is made evident through their conversation as well as through the colours they choose to write in. The chronologically earlier notes are written in different colours, indicating that they are using different pens. This suggests that at this point they are still physically distant from each other, not sharing space or belongings. Eventually, however, the final set of shared notes are both written in black ink, indicating that they are now potentially sharing a pen. This suggests that by the time of the final set of notes, their relationship has developed to such an extent that they write their notes in a shared space and with a shared pen. That this information is presented partly verbally and partly visually is what makes the novel *S.* multimodal. As for what multimodal features such as these add to immersion is that they make the novels' narrative

worlds more concrete than purely monomodal texts' worlds. Instead of merely describing the narrative world, they make it exist by means of the text's form and of its functions.

What this means is that the two novels' multimodal features improve immersion by making the reader experience the narrative worlds as if they were real. By having the reader engage with the texts in more than one way, they make the worlds come to life. The reader is thus relieved of some aspects of having to imagine the world and is instead given the chance to directly enter it. In the case of the labyrinth section of *House of Leaves*, for instance, the reader is given a description of the maze while also being drawn directly into it by means of the text's layout. The reader therefore not only reads about a maze, but physically navigates through it, turning the book around as they advance through the textual passages. By thus embodying the maze it describes, the novel simplifies the task of immersion. The multimodal elements of *S.* function in the same way, supporting the reader's attempts to imagine the novel's narrative world and thus facilitating their entry. If we consider the multimodal aspects of the novel's appearance, for instance, we can say that by looking like a convincing library book with superficially believable classification labels, the novel tells the reader about the narrative world in other than purely verbal means. The library stamps, for instance, indicate that within the narrative world, there is an actual Laguna Verde High School Library. Furthermore, these library stamps indicate that the physical copy of *Ship of Theseus* that the real reader holds in their hands actually belongs to this library. This fact is also briefly referenced verbally by Jen and Eric on the novel's title page (iii). The fact that this information is communicated to the reader through both verbal and visual means constitutes another example of multimodality. The reader learns of the library's existence from Jen and Eric's comments as well as from these library stamps. This improves the novel's immersive quality as they make the narrative world take shape in our reality. Elements of the narrative world are described to the reader verbally while they also manifest physically. In other words, the reader is not only told of a library, but

they are also provided with a physical book from that library. This kind of boundary break between fact and fiction helps the reader create a vivid and tangible mental image of the novel's narrative world and thus helps them engage with it.

4.3 Source of Readability 3: Meta-Level Play

The final source of readability discussed here is the two novels' playful self-consciousness. As explained previously, both novels present themselves and deliver their contents in ways that deviate noticeably from the conventional norms of traditional literature. They split their narratives into fragments, ask their readers to navigate through their complex structures, and employ more than purely verbal means to express meaning. These experimental characteristics are impossible to ignore, and they therefore draw attention to the novels as unusually presented texts. In this way, they highlight the novels' surface level, and draw attention to the novels not only as narrative worlds but also as texts that have been organised in specific ways in order to create specific effects. By keeping the reader aware of their surface structure, the novels engage the reader in a way that is different from immersion. They involve the reader in a meta-level game in which the reader is tasked with discovering the rules underlying the texts' structures. Instead of attempting to disguise their textual level, then, these texts highlight their physical surface and invite the reader to consciously appreciate the work that has been done to make the texts provide the experiences they do. This feature helps to explain the novels' readability as it constitutes another element that involves the reader with the texts and motivates them to keep reading. Like the novels' narrative centres and their immersive qualities, then, this self-consciousness helps the reader overlook any of the potential reading challenges the texts may cause and instead gives them guidance. In what follows I consider this feature as an example of metafiction, and I base my theoretical discussion on the work of Patricia Waugh. After providing a short overview of the concept, I then consider the ways in which fragmentation,

network structure, and multimodality employ it. Finally, I consider how these observations relate to the notion of readability.

In her work *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction*, Patricia Waugh explains that metafiction is a tendency shared by all novels (5). In other words, all novels display aspects of metafiction, though some can be classified as centrally metafictional works with metafiction as one of their dominant properties (2-15). As she explains, metafiction refers to the novelistic tendency of first creating an illusion and then dismantling it (6). This action of dismantling is realised by all novels in the sense that every fiction somehow reveals its artifice and fails to disguise the literary conventions it follows (2-15). In other words, every novel can be identified as a fictional text no matter how realistic and immersive it aims to be (2-15). A primarily metafictional novel, however, aims to intentionally break down this illusory artifice (4-14). Such a novel is designed to actively draw the reader out of the illusion and to guide them to notice the text and its construction from a more objective distance (4-14). Both *House of Leaves* and *S.* can be said to fall into this latter category, as they use their experimental characteristics to intentionally keep the reader occupied with the text on its surface level. The reader's return from the novels' immersive narrative worlds back to their surface structures is therefore no accident, but a deliberate feature. However, in the following discussion I am less concerned with portraying the texts as primarily metafictional novels that, according to Waugh, mainly aim to comment on the actual world and to undermine conventional ideologies (2-19). She highlights metafiction's role as platform for social criticism, which is not the focus of my thesis (11). In the rest of this section I therefore largely gloss over this discussion in order to concentrate on the texts' experimental characteristics as mere metafictional tendencies that can be said to improve readability in my two chosen novels.

In what follows, then, I observe the ways in which each of the novels' shared experimental features draws attention to the texts' surface level and thus engages the reader in

a self-conscious game. I first begin this discussion by analysing the role of fragmentation. As explained previously, the two novels are divided into short fragments with unclear origins and uncertain relationships with reality. Their surface structure and their placement aim to confuse the line between fact and fiction and to momentarily convince the reader of their factuality. To be more accurate, though, it must be stated that the actual reader never truly loses sight of where reality ends and fiction begins. They can, however, be persuaded to take on the role of the novels' authorial, narrative, and ideal narrative audiences.

As explained in section 3.1.2, these three audience roles established by Rabinowitz explain how readers can be aware of fictional texts as mere texts while also being immersed in them. In other words, these roles explain how readers can enjoy the novels on a meta-level while also simultaneously engaging with their narrative worlds. When the reader experiences immersion, they take on the roles of narrative and ideal narrative audience. They observe what the novels' narrative worlds contain, and they consider what aspects of these worlds they should pretend to believe in order to experience the worlds as real. When considering the texts from a meta-level, however, the reader takes on the role of the authorial audience. When occupying this role, they can consider how the authors have originally designed the texts, and how they have intended them to be read. Here, the reader can see the texts as games with implicit rules on how to succeed.

As the reader accepts the role of the authorial audience, then, they can see what the novels' fragmented structures aim to achieve. They can see that the fragments relate the novels' narrative worlds to our actual world and aim to grant easy access. As they recognise this intention, they can begin to appreciate the ways in which it has been performed. They can see the novels' fictional paratexts as fragments of narrative that have been disguised as actual paratexts, and they can then appreciate the disguise. In *House of Leaves*, for instance, the reader can enjoy the fictional sources cited by the narrators. They can first enjoy the task of discerning

between actual sources and fictional sources, after which they can appreciate the deceptive, yet often comical mock-academic titles of various real or imagined authors. In one example, for instance, Zampanò offers a lengthy quote supposedly written by an Edith Skourja, where she discusses the Navidson documentary. Because the documentary does not actually exist in our reality, this quote is obviously fictional. The reader can then deduce that the source Zampanò gives in his footnotes is equally fake. Furthermore, the source's title is named in a way that makes it seem both possible and humorous at once. The essay Skourja has purportedly written is entitled "Riddles Without", while the name of the work it was originally published in is *Riddles Within* (34). These titles are not fictional in any obvious way, but their humorous coordination suggests that they do not actually exist. Similarly, in *S.*, the reader who chooses to occupy the role of the authorial audience can enjoy the effect created by the novel's physical artefacts. They can both appreciate the design of the artefacts as well as admire the effort that has been put into creating them. When considering the map that is drawn onto a physical napkin (306-7), for instance, the authorial audience can appreciate the illusion of authenticity it creates. The reader can see that the napkin is not real, while also realizing that it is trying to appear real in order to draw the reader into the novel's narrative world. By shifting between the roles of the authorial, the narrative, and the ideal narrative audience, then, the reader can simultaneously use this artefact as an aid to immersion, while also appreciating it from a more objective distance.

The next experimental feature that can be said to enhance the reader's meta-level engagement with the novels is their network structure. As explained above, this feature can enhance immersion by connecting the novels' various narrative strands into full narrative worlds. The novels' network structures allow for their different voices to interact in ways that result in vivid imaginary realities that can be easily accessed. In addition to their immersive qualities, the network structures also remind the reader of the texts' surface levels and thus add

to them an element of engaging playfulness. They transform the texts into puzzles that the reader is encouraged to assemble by reading each piece in order. However, there is no fully correct or fully incorrect way to assemble the novels' contents. Instead, the novels can be read in multiple different ways. This makes each reader's reading experience unique and thus also makes it highly personal. What the novels ask their readers to do, then, is discover their own paths through the texts and construct their own versions of the narratives according to the way they read. This makes the act of reading an active process where the reader is given a different role from that of a mere observer. They must choose which paths to follow at which point, and which paths to ignore before potentially returning to them at a later moment. This apparent freedom to choose gives the reader a sense of engagement that operates more on the meta-level of reading than on the level of immersion.

If we consider examples of how this works, we can begin by discussing the superscript links of *House of Leaves*. As observed in section 2.2.2, the novel's links follow two different formats. In most instances, the linked textual fragments are connected by links designated by superscript numbers. As Juha-Pekka Kilpiö suggests, this format simplifies the task of connecting matching elements, as they can be expected to appear in a sequential order (63). Although they appear one after the other, however, does not mean that following them offers no challenge to the reader at all. As the links are frequently added onto fragments that follow on from each other, the paths that the links create often become extremely long. In these instances, the reader must cognitively navigate through several of the narrative layers and physically flip through the novel from its beginning to its end and back again. In other words, these apparently simple links also work to make the reader's role an active one. The other types of links discussed by Kilpiö are nevertheless even more directly involved in challenging the reader to read in an active manner. The superscript symbols require more effort to connect and are less obviously situated in linear strands (63). This allows for a great deal of variety in each

reader's reading experience, since it is unlikely that every reader discovers every existing link and, furthermore, discovers them in exactly the same order. This task of searching for matching pairs of links adds to the reader's experience of engaging with a game that can be completed and that can be enjoyed as a game. Similarly, in *S.*, the search for links is relatively challenging as the links or their relationships with each other are never explicitly marked or explained. The reader is tasked with discovering these connections independently and to establish the meanings behind these connections on their own. The reader is, for instance, never explained the chronology of Jen and Eric's notes, and they must therefore deduce the order of writing on the basis of other clues. The fact that the first notes of the novel appear on its very first page and that they work to introduce the characters is, for instance, the basis on which the reader can conclude that the notes written in the same colours as these ones are probably the oldest. In addition to these links which can be found within the novels themselves, there are also other links that connect external material to the novels' contents, and these links are also highly subtle since their existence is rarely made clear within the texts. The Twitter accounts of Jen and Eric, for example, have an impact on the reader's experience of reading *S.* only if the reader discovers them independently. The novel *S.* therefore gives the reader a chance to find these accounts and therefore engages them in an even more elaborate game that extends beyond the covers of the novel itself.

The final experimental feature considered here is that of multimodality. Multimodal novels create meaning by employing multiple modes of communication simultaneously. In other words, they employ text, images, typography, and other methods to transfer a message from the author to the reader. As previously explained, *House of Leaves* and *S.* contain multiple multimodal features and employ a great variety of communicative modes to deliver their contents. The use of these modes is partly involved in creating immersion, but they can also be said to draw attention to the novels' contents on a meta-level. They draw attention to the novels

as texts that have been manipulated into images and as texts that include visually impressive illustrations and physical artefacts. They therefore provide the reader with a sense of artistic and aesthetic appreciation, while they also encourage the reader to translate these multimodal messages into meaningful information. As such, they engage the reader in a decoding process that requires them to combine textual and visual cues into elements of meaning that make sense in their contexts. This activity ensures that the novels' multimodal components are seen as the vital elements of narrative they are instead of mere distracting additional information that reduces readerly enjoyment.

In *House of Leaves*, for instance, the reader is frequently engaged in a process of interpreting verbally and visually expressed information. In the labyrinth sequence, for example, the reader needs to step back in order to realise what the text is in that instance trying to achieve. They need to look at the text as text and consider the reason behind the unusual layout. Here, then, the reader is required to see the meta-level information the novel contains in order to appreciate the effect it is trying to create. Understanding what the text is trying to do makes the reader see the section as the interactive feature it is, where the reader's physical actions create part of the meaning. This adds to the reader's enjoyment, as they can then see that they are involved in a game where their actions develop and affect the narrative. In *S.*, a similar effect is created by the novel's visual appearance and its convincing yet recognizably false disguise. When the reader sees that the novel pretends to look like a copy of an actual real-world novel that has once belonged to an actual library, they can begin to appreciate the illusion it is trying to create. The disguise is then revealed to be a playful pretence which the reader can take part in. The novel thus invites its reader to make sense of its contents as a game that relies on the reader's ability to discern between reality and artifice.

5 Conclusion

In this thesis I have aimed to discover some explanations for the readability of *House of Leaves* and *S.* I have argued that, despite their challenging appearances, both novels contain features that improve their accessibility. As Suleiman has observed, this is possible if one accepts the existence of both traditional and non-traditional sources of readability (1981: 26-7). Although the novels do not therefore adhere to the traditional expectations of linearity, coherence, non-contradiction, and the psychological depth of characters (1981: 24), they do follow certain other aesthetic and functional norms that the reader can identify and utilize while reading. What I have attempted to demonstrate, then, is that these non-traditional sources of readability are connected to the novels' genre conventions, their immersive qualities, and their meta-level self-consciousness. Although it might seem contradictory to suggest that the novels' readability could thus be due to features that draw the reader into the fiction while also keeping them aware of the texts' fictional nature, I argue that this is possible if we consider the act of reading through the perspective of Rabinowitz' reading roles. Each actual reader can adopt any of the three roles implied in literary texts, and due to this possibility, they can be simultaneously aware of the novels' immersive and meta-level qualities. The reader can therefore shift their attention from the texts' contents to their surface structure at will, and they can thus employ both strategies as ways to improve their reading experience. Furthermore, I suggest that the novels contain elements that improve accessibility in part by drawing attention away from the texts' experimental features, and in part by highlighting them. The first strategy is realised by the novels' genre conventions, while immersion and self-consciousness are created by the characteristics of fragmentation, network structure, and multimodality.

This thesis has therefore strived to provide an explanation to the question of what makes *House of Leaves* and *S.* readable experimental novels. However, as my analysis draws heavily on subjective interpretations of the various reading roles embedded in my chosen subject texts,

my approach does leave space for further study. The process of reading and the reading subject can be modelled in multiple alternative ways, and this change may alter the results. As stated in section 3.1.3, then, the methods adopted in this thesis yield a specific type of answer that can be modified or added to by other approaches. Future study could therefore discover further sources of readability by employing different concepts of reading and the reader. Furthermore, my thesis leaves space for an empirical study of actual readers which could either support or contradict my theory-based findings. This approach has already been adopted in a small scale by Gibbons (2017), but even her work allows further study. My thesis has also focused heavily on the novels' narratives and on their structural properties, which leaves space for an approach that concentrates on the novels' social aspects. There is much left to be said about the novels as partly physical and partly digital works that invite readers to connect with each other online in social and cooperative reading experiences. This characteristic has been considered by Tanderup and Pressman, for instance, but even more attention could be given to the novels' status as part of our contemporary reality. While the novels thus allow for more research, this thesis provides a broad overview of how they encourage their readers to interact with their contents by employing both conventional and experimental features. The value of this thesis, then, is in the way it explains how novels can employ unusual strategies to create new forms of readability.

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